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Public Art Courses in Colleges and Universities: Value Realization of the New Aesthetic Education in Rural Practice Teaching

Xiaohua Huang

School of Design, NingboTech University, Ningbo, 315100, China
hxhzdnblgxy@163.com

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Abstract: Public art courses serve as the main channel of aesthetic education in colleges and universities, yet their teaching has long been dominated by classroom appreciation, so that students seldom gain genuine aesthetic experience. The Notice on Fully Implementing the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Initiative calls for popularizing artistic practice and improving the quality of aesthetic education in rural areas, which points to a possible direction for curriculum reform. What rural areas lack is not material but an intermediary that turns the material into course content. Taking the cultural commissioner system in Ninghai County, Zhejiang Province and the resulting university-local practice as an observation case, this paper examines how public art courses change in teaching content, teaching paradigm and assessment mechanism once they enter rural sites, and proposes a practical teaching path centred on project-driven content, mutual cultivation and reconstructed assessment. The paper argues that the value of rural practice teaching lies not in adding one more field trip, but in enabling aesthetic education, cultural identity and professional training to take place in one and the same process.

1. Introduction

The place of aesthetic education in talent cultivation at colleges and universities has been repeatedly emphasized over the past decade. In October 2020, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving School Aesthetic Education in the New Era, which set explicit requirements for universities to offer public art courses capable of transmitting fine traditional Chinese culture and artistic classics. Three years later, the Ministry of Education issued the Notice on Fully Implementing the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Initiative, listing "popularizing artistic practice activities" and "improving the quality of aesthetic education in rural areas" among its eight actions[1,2]. The policy direction is clear: aesthetic education cannot stop at classroom lecturing and appreciation of works.

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Public art courses are the main vehicle of aesthetic education in colleges and universities. At NingboTech University this course is offered to students majoring in environmental design at the School of Design. Its total teaching hours amount to just over sixty, and the students' artistic backgrounds vary widely. The content is largely art history, appreciation of works and design pieces; after a single session covering one school, a few works and some design practice, what students retain are items of knowledge rather than aesthetic experience itself. A remark frequently heard in course evaluations—"it sounds interesting at the time, but I cannot recall it afterwards"—in fact points to the same problem: an aesthetic eye is difficult to cultivate by listening.

Practice-based components are therefore repeatedly called for. Within them two approaches can be distinguished. One is skills training carried out in on-campus laboratories and studios: safe and controllable, yet separated from real problems by a layer. The other is field practice beyond the campus gate: costly to organize and full of uncertainty, but it places students before living objects, living people and living demands. In recent years design and fine arts programmes have increasingly treated the countryside as a site of practice, and the experience accumulated there contains both examples worth learning from and lessons worth remembering.

This paper is concerned with the latter. When the countryside becomes the site of a public art course, what happens to the course itself? Is the change merely an adjustment of teaching form, or does it touch the substance of the new aesthetic education? To answer this question, the paper takes Ninghai County in Zhejiang Province as a case for observation. Since 2024 Ninghai has implemented the cultural commissioner system, and a considerable proportion of the professionals dispatched at the provincial, municipal and county levels come from universities. Their work in the villages has, as it happens, provided public art courses with an institutionalized interface to the field.

The study relies mainly on literature analysis and case study. Its materials include policy texts, published reports and the author's own observational records from participation in the practices concerned. The article first discusses the shift in how the function of public art courses is defined, then analyses the institutional support and teaching mechanisms required for rural sites to enter the curriculum, and finally attempts to set out operable pathways for discussion among colleagues.

2. From Classroom Appreciation to Field Practice: Re-positioning the Function of Public Art Courses

2.1 The Structural Limits of Appreciation-oriented Teaching

There is nothing unreasonable about understanding a public art course as a course in appreciation. Within limited hours it can cover a broad range of knowledge, it lends itself to uniform assessment, and it is relatively friendly to students without an artistic background. The problem lies in the task this course is expected to perform. What aesthetic education aims to cultivate is sensibility and judgement, and these two are precisely what cannot easily be transmitted through lecturing.

Observed from the teaching site, appreciation-oriented courses have at least three limitations. The first concerns position. Appreciation is mainly a matter of looking, and students remain throughout in the position of the spectator, while the standing of a work is settled by the teacher or the textbook. This is where the earlier remark that "an aesthetic eye is difficult to cultivate by listening" has its root: what students receive is a judgement already chewed over by someone else, rather than a genuine reaction of their own. The second concerns content. The classic works that enter the classroom have mostly been filtered over a long period and stand at a distance from the life experience of contemporary students, who can state a work's standing yet often cannot say what it has to do with them. The third concerns assessment. Appreciation courses are usually examined by a short essay or a design case, which tests design and expression but makes it difficult to discern

the level of aesthetic cultivation. Studies have noted that public art courses remain in an awkward position at some institutions: their orientation wavers, their content is slow to update, and their teaching outcomes are unstable, so that a fresh review of their value orientation is necessary[3].

There is a deeper limitation still. What an appreciation course imparts is knowledge about beauty, whereas aesthetic experience can only be generated in experience itself. Students need the chance to face an unfinished work, a space awaiting treatment, or a group of people with concrete demands, and then to form a judgement of their own within that situation. The classroom is hard put to provide this.

2.2 The Policy Basis for a Practical Turn

The weight of the practical component in public art courses has clearly increased over the past two years. The Ministry of Education's Notice on Fully Implementing the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Initiative sets out eight actions, among which the "action to popularize artistic practice activities" requires a regularized exhibition mechanism open to everyone, while the "action to improve and develop aesthetic education in rural areas" writes the flow of resources between city and countryside into its task list[2]. The policy's focus is clear: aesthetic education should move from lecturing to activity, and from the classroom to the site.

Scholarly discussion has advanced in step. One study, working from the context of the new liberal arts initiative, argues that public art courses should step beyond the boundary of a single artistic discipline and connect the knowledge of the humanities with that of science and technology, and art with engineering[4]; another maintains that the idea of intermedia art should be introduced into aesthetic education in higher education so as to enrich the practical forms of the course[5]. These discussions point to one thing: the function of public art courses is shifting from imparting aesthetic knowledge to cultivating aesthetic capacity.

The countryside is regarded as a particularly suitable place for cultivating capacity. In analysing aesthetic education in rural schools, one study points out that rural aesthetic education takes place within a concrete local field and is characterized by its lived, spatial and cultural nature; its functions include cultivation, innovation and integration, and it can promote the harmonious development of the individual and sustain the roots of local culture[6]. This judgement is aimed at primary and secondary schools, yet the two notions of "local field" and "lived nature" hold equally for public art courses in higher education. The real conditions of rural aesthetic education are, of course, far from ideal. Discussing small rural schools, another study enumerates multiple obstacles: insufficiently detailed governmental embedding, inadequate validity of cognitive embedding, and barriers to identity embedding[7]. These obstacles remind us that taking a course into the countryside cannot be taken for granted.

2.3 Why the Rural Field Is Irreplaceable

To treat the countryside as the site of a public art course, one must first be clear about how it differs from an ordinary practice base. Art museums, design firms and cultural-creative parks can all offer opportunities for practice, but what they offer is a finished environment and explicit rules; what the countryside offers is somewhat different.

The first is the real problem. Matters in a village are mostly concrete: how to put an idle patch of wasteland to use, how to make the open ground beside an old ancestral hall both pleasant and frequented, how to turn a craft handed down for generations into something that sells. The answers are not supplied by the teacher, nor settled by students on a whim, but arrived at through repeated consultation with the villagers.

The second is the real subject. The "users" in a village are concrete: where the elderly are used to

sitting in the sun, where children play after school, whether a craftsman is willing to alter the style he has worked with for half his life. Every adjustment on a design drawing corresponds to these particular people. What students learn here is to restore "the user" from an abstract concept to a particular person.

The third is real collaboration. The affairs of a village involve villagers, the village committee, local government and outside investors, among others, and no renovation is decided by the designer alone. One study summarizes the actors in artistic rural construction as a plural set of roles—artists, villagers, local government and market entities—and points out that whether these actors can interact rather than intervene one-sidedly often determines a project's success[8]. The same judgement applies to teaching: bringing students into a village is not a matter of letting them "remake" anyone, but of learning, in a site with multiple participants, how to respond to real demands.

3. How Rural Sites Enter the Curriculum: Institutional Support and Teaching Mechanisms

The previous section showed that the rural field has a distinctive value for public art courses, but for that value to become real, one link is still missing: the channel that brings the course into the countryside—who organizes it, in what name one goes, what one does there, and what remains after the work is done. Without such a channel, rural practice teaching tends to depend on a teacher's personal connections and enthusiasm, done once and counted once, and hard to sustain.

3.1 The Field Interface Provided by the Cultural Commissioner System

The cultural commissioner system introduced in Zhejiang in 2024 provides a relatively stable channel between universities and the countryside. The system selects, at provincial, municipal and county levels, core members of performing arts troupes, university teachers, professional staff of cultural centres and independent artists, and assigns them for a two-year term to stationed administrative villages to deliver cultural services. Unlike the earlier model of concentrated performances sent to the countryside, it emphasizes long-term residence, requiring commissioners to spend a specified number of days in the village each year and to go down month by month. For universities, its significance lies in this: teachers enter the village in a professional capacity, and they are given sufficient time.

The operating logic of this system has already been analysed. Taking a village in Zhejiang as a case, Li Tao and Ning Jia propose a framework of dual embeddedness and institutional activation: the commissioner is embedded, on the one hand, in the institutional sequence, obtaining the guarantee of status and funding, and, on the other, in the village's resource network, integrating external and local cultural resources through precisely matching needs, and thereby, by means of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements, awakening the villagers' cultural subjectivity[9]. Other scholars, borrowing the concept of translation from actor-network theory, describe the commissioner as a key node in a network of multiple actors[10]. These analyses reveal the same thing: the commissioner is not a porter of resources but an organizer of relations.

From a teaching perspective, what deserves most attention in this arrangement is time. A two-year posting means that a teacher appears repeatedly in the same village, moving from stranger to acquaintance, from "someone sent from above" to "someone from our village". The trust and understanding accumulated in this process are precisely the precondition hardest for a course to obtain when entering the countryside. Ninghai is among the counties where the system was implemented early. In June 2024, eighteen provincial, municipal and county-level cultural commissioners took up posts in various administrative villages, and a number of them were university teachers. Over two years the county delivered eighteen cultural projects at the three

levels, held more than 2,000 mass performances and nearly 300 specialized training sessions, coordinated 2.4 million yuan in special funds and leveraged over 15 million yuan in fiscal matching funds and social capital[11]. Behind these figures lies a field network available to the course: which village lacks what, which resources can be used, and who in the village has a say—the commissioner has a fair idea. For a course, this amounts to a "field interface": the teacher need not explore village conditions from scratch, nor worry that no one will receive them after arrival.

3.2 Converting Real Problems into Course Content

With the channel in place, the next step is to convert the villages' needs into topics that a course can take on. This step is not easy. Village needs tend to be scattered and concrete, whereas a course requires topics with clear boundaries that can be completed within a semester and that carry a certain professional substance. Well converted, both teachers and students benefit from a real problem; poorly converted, the course degenerates into a group visit.

The common practice in Ninghai is to design topics starting from a village's resource endowment. Nanxi Village in Shenshen Town has hot-spring resources, and a wasteland at the village entrance had lain idle for nearly twenty years. The commissioner Duan Hongjiao, together with university teachers and students and local artists, turned it into a hot-spring cultural courtyard combining leisure and dining, and later launched the "Creeper on the Cultural Courtyard" initiative, working with surrounding villages to create eight themed cultural courtyards, including those devoted to hot-spring culture and imperial-examination culture[12]. Ruo'ao Village in Yishi Town retains a complete complex of Ming and Qing buildings. The commissioner Ren Tian did not touch the fabric of the buildings but made a set of small-scale artworks from local bamboo, placing them at the village entrance and in an old study hall, giving the ancient village new points at which to linger[11]. What these topics share is light intervention—no drastic surgery, but design as a response to concrete problems.

Other topics point to the transformation of resources. The island fishing villages of Qiangjiao Town have fishing-knot crafts and fisherfolk customs; Nanzhuang Village in Yuexi Township has tidal flats and a fishing-farming heritage; Hehong Village in Meilin Subdistrict has its lore of longevity and its paper-cutting craft. These resources formerly remained at the level of daily life, but through visual design and course development they can be turned into experience projects or cultural-creative products. Discussing a rural planning and design course, one study points out that genuinely integrating ideological-political education with professional content requires reconstructing four links—objectives, content, methods and assessment[13]; another, taking the homestay space design in Xigang Village, Pingwang Town as an example, shows that treating a real village space as the object of design can effectively remedy the tendency in design teaching to value drawings and neglect implementation[14]. These judgements corroborate one another with the practice in Ninghai.

It should be noted that the authority to decide topics should not rest entirely with the teacher. As to what a village needs, the villagers are best placed to speak. Ninghai operates a service chain in which the people place the order, the government dispatches it, and the commissioner takes it up, putting the identification of needs first[11]. What a course takes on should be a real need that still holds after this round of screening, not a need the teacher has imagined on the villagers' behalf.

3.3 Mutual Cultivation: Gains for Both Students and the Village

The value of rural practice teaching does not lie with the students alone. When a course is held in a village, the village gains something from it too.

Take the students first. Students in design disciplines usually work on topics drawn from

textbooks or set by teachers, and the criteria of judgement are hypothetical. Once in a village, the criteria become whether villagers are willing to use the design and whether visitors are willing to come. The approach in Liyang Village is representative. The resident commissioner Huang Xiaohua is a teacher at a university school of design. He led students again and again along the old street, to the distillery and to the stories of children's poetry, moving final-year design projects into the ancient village and having students develop proposals around real courtyards and real businesses. In June 2026 these graduation projects were exhibited in the village's paper-cutting hall. From the renovation of a node on Liyang's old street to the rebranding of the distillery, from the spatial planning of homestays in Liyang Kong Village to the design of a chrysanthemum garden in Haitou Village, the proposals confronted specific plots and specific businesses[15]. The project by the student Shi Yi, "Reconstructing the Cultural Space of Wine Tourism Based on the Concept of the Five Senses: The Case of the Liyang Distillery", began from the premise that installation design pursued formal beauty too much and neglected everyday use, and only after her supervisor's guidance did she consider utility, interaction and aesthetics together[15]. This self-criticism illustrates precisely what a rural site does for design education: it pulls the vague standard of "good-looking" back to the question of whether it works.

Now the village. Wangfu Village in Yuelong Subdistrict had dull cultural activities. The commissioner Miao Jing began with physical training, encouraged villagers to take the stage, and set up a villagers' open mic in which operatic contests were paired with song competitions[16]. The villager Sun Li had no performance experience before, but later sang "Qinghai-Tibet Plateau" at the public benefit performance "Stars Shine over Ninghai, Songs of the Gou Countryside", stunning the audience[11]. Xujia Village is a reservoir-resettlement village; there the commissioner Hu Qiongqiong re-established the Xujia Luantan opera troupe, disbanded for more than forty years, staging fifteen full-length operas and conducting over a hundred training sessions in two years, and also produced Ninghai's first original "village gift", Wind Rises over Xixi, in which 120 villagers took the stage to perform their village's history[17]. The three village-level opera troupes in Zhehu Yang Village, Qiantong Town, were likewise brought out in that same year.

That villagers move from the audience to the stage is a change of real significance for teaching. It shows that aesthetic capacity is not the monopoly of professionals: ordinary people, once given appropriate guidance and an opportunity to present themselves, can likewise make the leap from watching to expressing. Seeing this, students gain a truer understanding of whom design serves. Such mutual gains also suggest that the boundaries of teaching can be drawn wider still: those whom a course serves need not be only enrolled students.

4. Constructing the Path of Rural Practice Teaching in College Public Art Courses

The previous two sections explained, respectively, the value of the rural field and the channel through which it enters the curriculum. What follows is a question at the operational level: if rural practice is to be formally incorporated into the regular components of a public art course, how should its content, organization and assessment be designed? Drawing on the experience of Ninghai and on insights from teaching, this paper proposes three interrelated pathways.

4.1 Project-driven Organization: Real Needs in Place of Hypothetical Assignments

The first concerns how teaching content is organized. A traditional course takes knowledge units as its main line, attaching practice to a point of knowledge and closing it out with a single exercise. Rural practice teaching is better organized the other way round, taking a project as its main line: first determine a real task from the village, then introduce the knowledge required as it is needed.

This has two advantages. First, motivation is clear: students know for whom the assignment is

made and what use it has, and their commitment differs markedly from that shown in hypothetical assignments. Second, knowledge acquires a point of application: compositional principles, materials, colour and spatial scale are repeatedly drawn upon in carrying out the task and are retained better than when taught in isolation.

In practice a project can be divided into several stages: field investigation and confirmation of the problem, initial formulation of a proposal, communication and revision with villagers, and realization and review of the outcome. Each stage has a definite output and something that can be discussed. As course time is limited, a project should not aim too high. Improving a small space, producing one visual identity system, or designing a set of cultural-creative samples within a semester are all appropriate in scale. Some practice in Ninghai links course assignments to the commissioner's continuing work: proposals made by students are carried forward by later projects, or taken up and deepened by the next cohort[18]. Handled in this way, the village does not feel it has been let down, and students can see what becomes of their work.

4.2 Mutual Cultivation: Collaboration between the Teaching Subject and Local Forces

The second concerns the expansion of the teaching subject. In rural practice teaching, the teacher's role must change. No longer the sole source of knowledge, the teacher becomes more like an organizer of the project and a guide to judgement. Those who really teach the students are often the villagers, craftsmen and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage on site.

Such collaboration requires several conditions. The first is equality. However novel a student's proposal may be, it cannot override the villagers' habits of life; and however old-fashioned the villagers' experience may seem, it may contain wisdom the designer has not thought of. On one occasion Duan Hongjiao's team encountered a succulent grower who was wary of being interviewed and turned away at first sight; only after the team called at her door every day and studied arrangements and combinations with her did the situation open up, and eventually her succulent products appeared on the common-prosperity shelf[12]. This process of adjustment is itself a lesson. The second condition is continuity. A single visit to a village can hardly produce collaboration; only through repeated exchange in the same village do both sides come to understand what the other is saying. This corresponds exactly to the teaching value of the two-year posting arrangement for cultural commissioners.

One study notes that artistic rural construction is shifting from domination by a single artist to the joint participation of multiple subjects[8], and further distinguishes the different roles that outside forces may play[19]. This distinction is instructive for teaching: the identity of teachers and students in a village had best not be that of a condescending "design party", but that of collaborators who consult and complete the work together with the villagers. As regards organizational form, two modes are fairly mature in Ninghai practice. One is a long-term pairing between a university school and an administrative village, allowing different student teams to continue the work in the same village in relays; the other is to form interdisciplinary groups around a particular theme, placing students of design, communication and management in one project. The former addresses continuity, the latter comprehensiveness.

4.3 Reconstructing Assessment: From Grading Outcomes to Weighing Process and Impact Together

The third concerns assessment. Assessment in existing public art courses is mostly static, based on attendance, classroom performance and a final assignment, and it tests whether students have completed the prescribed actions. If rural practice teaching follows this model, assessment will be distorted—for what is most valuable happens precisely in the process and is manifested in the

impact of the outcome on the world outside.

Three directions for improvement are feasible. First, incorporate process into assessment. Records of field investigation, the trajectory of revisions to a proposal, and the effectiveness of communication with villagers can all serve as grounds for evaluation. Second, introduce multiple assessors. Besides the teacher, feedback from the village should be counted; whether villagers are willing to use a proposal and how well it works is the most direct test of it. Third, attend to the actual impact of the outcome. Whether a work has been used and whether it has brought about further change say more than the degree of completion. After the graduation design exhibition in Liyang Village, the town and village authorities agreed that the students' designs were highly compatible with the village's development needs and resolved to implement as soon as possible those that could be realized[18]. Feedback of this kind is itself valid material for teaching assessment.

In discussing the value orientation of aesthetic education in higher education, Xu Na argues that the assessment of aesthetic education should return to its essential purpose and avoid substituting technical indicators for observation of a person's aesthetic growth[20]. This is an important reminder. Introducing impact into assessment is not a matter of covering old quantitative indicators with new ones, but of bringing assessment closer to the true aims of aesthetic education. In evaluating the effectiveness of cultural commissioners' work, Ninghai used four dimensions: investment in projects and funds, reflecting the breadth of resource descent; villagers' participation, reflecting the degree of activation of cultural subjectivity; online dissemination and regional branding, reflecting the radius of cultural influence; and the regularization of teams and the checklist-based management of intangible cultural heritage, reflecting whether the effects can continue[11]. This approach is instructive for course assessment: a course can likewise be examined from four aspects—the genuine degree of student participation, observable evidence of growth in capacity, the use of works in real settings, and whether the teaching relationship can continue. Digital technology, moreover, facilitates the recording and dissemination of practice teaching. One study discusses the possibilities and limits of generative artificial intelligence in rural cultural revitalization[21]; applying it to teaching archives and the dissemination of outcomes may be more prudent than applying it to content generation.

5. Conclusion

The discussion in this paper can be drawn to a single point: the value of rural practice teaching for public art courses lies not in adding one more sketching trip, but in changing how the course is organized and assessed, and in changing the positional relationship between teacher and student.

The experience of Ninghai shows that whether this can be done depends not on whether there is a pretty village, but on whether there is a stable channel through which the course can be brought in. The cultural commissioner system provides just such a channel: it keeps university teachers in the village over the long term in a professional capacity, giving the course a dependable field and a trustworthy counterpart. Without this channel, rural practice teaching easily falls back into a state of relying on personal connections, done once and counted once.

The difficulties should also be recognized. Teachers must divide their energy between their posting and classroom teaching; the semester rhythm of a course does not always coincide with the project cycle of a village; and reform of the assessment mechanism requires support at the institutional level. These are practical problems that the enthusiasm of individual teachers can hardly solve.

Seen from a longer perspective, incorporating the countryside into the regular components of public art courses means more than improving teaching methods. In such a course students confront

a real countryside, meet ordinary people with concrete needs, and produce proposals that must withstand testing in a real environment. Aesthetic education, cultural identity and professional capacity occur together in this process, and this is perhaps the most substantial way for the new aesthetic education to take root at the level of the curriculum.

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