

Aesthetic Education and Cultural Confidence in Curriculum Ideological-Political Reform: A Case Study of the “History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture” Course

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Abstract: Against the broader context of the “grand ideological-political education” initiative and the national aesthetic education campaign, the “History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture” course—a core foundation for design majors—carries a triple responsibility: transmitting knowledge, cultivating aesthetic sensibilities, and guiding value formation. Drawing on our teaching reform practice, this paper explores how to integrate ideological-political education into the course from two dimensions—aesthetic education and cultural confidence. We identify four thematic pillars for embedding ideological-political content: the legacy of China’s outstanding traditional architectural culture; the spirit of craftsmanship and patriotic commitment embodied in architectural works; cross-cultural comparisons that reinforce cultural confidence; and the people-centred, time-responsive nature of architectural creation. The reform employs comparative teaching methods, on-site surveys of local architectural heritage, and digital resource development to weave value education organically into professional instruction. Preliminary results show that the approach has strengthened students’ cultural identity and national pride, elevated their aesthetic and humanistic literacy, and offers a replicable model for integrating ideological-political education into history-theory courses in design disciplines.

Keywords: History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture; Curriculum ideological-political education; Aesthetic education; Cultural confidence; Teaching reform

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1. Introduction

The “History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture” is a core foundational course for art and design majors, covering the evolution of architectural styles, structural systems, and formal characteristics across civilizations. Beyond imparting factual knowledge, the course naturally invites students to interpret architectural cultures, develop cross-cultural perspectives, and build cultural self-assurance^[1,2]. With the nationwide push for ideological-political education in all curricula, the question of how to achieve a genuine integration of professional content and value

guidance in this course has become a pressing concern for design education reformers.

The subject matter of architectural history lends itself particularly well to such integration. China's timber-frame building tradition, which endured for millennia, embodies a distinct structural logic and aesthetic philosophy—from palatial complexes to garden retreats, from urban planning codes to vernacular dwellings. At the same time, comparing Chinese and foreign architectural achievements enables students to appreciate the unique contributions of each civilization, and to recognize the enduring vitality of China's own heritage. The key challenge lies in translating these latent educational resources into systematic classroom practice^[3–5].

This study draws on our teaching experience in the “History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture” course at the College of Fine Arts, Tangshan Normal University. Centered on the dual themes of “aesthetic education” and “cultural confidence,” we propose concrete pathways for integrating ideological-political content, with the aim of offering a practical reference for similar reform efforts in design history and theory courses.

2. Foundational conditions for the reform

2.1. Course readiness

The “History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture” has been a core requirement in our undergraduate design curriculum for several teaching cycles. Its syllabus is well-developed, covering the global chronological development of architecture and representative stylistic features, providing a solid disciplinary foundation for embedding ideological-political themes. The course team maintains strong political qualifications and has recorded no teaching incidents in the past five years.

2.2. Institutional support for ideological-political education

The university's Party Committee places high priority on ideological-political work. In 2026, we secured three national-level projects under the Ministry of Education's program for enhancing ideological-political quality, including a model for organized practical education for teacher-training students, a digital heritage project on revolutionary artifacts, and a case study on integrating ideological-political education across school levels. The digital resources, practical education mechanisms, and accumulated experience from these projects offer a valuable reference for our course reform.

2.3. Local cultural resources

Tangshan is rich in architectural heritage. The Peiren Historical and Cultural Street, centered on the nearly century-old Peiren Girls' School building (a municipal heritage site since 2011), together with the China (Tangshan) Industrial Museum and the Hans Kündt Residence Museum, forms a cultural cluster that preserves the city's industrial memory. The university's digital project on revolutionary artifacts further provides immersive teaching resources and fieldwork sites for architectural education.

2.4. Existing mechanisms for integration

The university has established a guiding principle of “integrating value shaping, knowledge transmission, and ability development” in curriculum design. Ideological-political objectives are embedded in syllabus approval, lesson plan evaluation, and all teaching activities. Regular collective lesson-planning sessions and cross-disciplinary collaboration between subject teachers and ideological-political instructors are institutionalized, creating a supportive environment for systematic integration.

3. Reform design and implementation

3.1. Framework for ideological-political integration

Based on the specific nature of architectural history, we developed a four-pillar integration framework:

- (1) Preserving China's outstanding traditional architectural culture: Chinese timber-frame architecture, with its structural rationality and aesthetic refinement, reflects a continuous civilizational ethos. Teaching units trace the evolution from Tang-Song grandeur to Ming-Qing elegance, and from palatial to garden and vernacular forms, helping students grasp the philosophical underpinnings—harmony between heaven and humanity, the spirit of integration—that shaped these built environments.
- (2) Cultivating craftsmanship and patriotic commitment: Historical figures such as Li Jie (author of the *Yingzao Fashi*), Kuai Xiang (master builder of the Ming capital), and modern architectural educators like Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin exemplify professional dedication and love for the country. Through biographical narratives and project analyses, we encourage students to internalize a sense of vocation and social responsibility.
- (3) Fostering cultural confidence through cross-cultural comparison: The course's comparative structure—juxtaposing Chinese and foreign developments in parallel historical periods—allows students to appreciate both the contributions of other civilizations and the distinctive and lasting value of China's own architectural tradition.
- (4) Emphasizing the people-centred and time-responsive nature of architecture: Architecture is never purely formal; it is always a response to social needs. We guide students to see how architecture serves its users, and how contemporary practice can continue this legacy of cultural and social responsiveness.

3.2. Content reorganization

We restructured the course content around thematic modules rather than a purely chronological or geographical sequence:

- (1) The Chinese traditional building system: timber technology, spatial organization, aesthetic principles, and representative types (palaces, altars, gardens, dwellings).
- (2) Modern Chinese architecture: the impact of Western technology, the search for a Sino-modern synthesis, and key architects' experiments.
- (3) Foreign architectural history: a survey of Western and non-Western traditions from antiquity to modernity.
- (4) Comparative studies: in-depth juxtapositions of selected cases to sharpen cross-cultural understanding and reinforce cultural confidence.

In each module, ideological-political elements are embedded as organic threads rather than as added appendages. For instance, when teaching Chinese timber construction, we do not stop at technical description; we ask why this system persisted for so long, and what cultural values sustained it. When covering Greek or Gothic architecture, we draw comparisons with contemporary Chinese developments to illuminate how different civilizations approached similar problems differently, and what that reveals about each culture.

3.3. Teaching methods and tools

Two pedagogical strategies proved particularly effective: comparative analysis and experiential learning.

- (1) Comparative teaching uses a dual-axis approach—vertical (the internal evolution of each tradition) and horizontal (contemporaneous achievements across civilizations). This method does not rank civilizations

but fosters appreciation of diversity and of each tradition's unique contributions.

- (2) Local heritage fieldwork: Leveraging Tangshan's architectural resources, we organized site visits and surveying exercises at the Peiren Historical Street, the Industrial Museum, and other heritage sites. These direct encounters with physical spaces and historical layers transform abstract classroom knowledge into tangible experience.
- (3) Digital resource development: Leveraging the university's digital infrastructure, we created 3D models, virtual reconstructions, and immersive walk-throughs to help students grasp complex spatial and structural concepts. These resources are also shared through the online learning platform.

3.4. Assessment optimization

We adopted a combined formative and summative evaluation system. Formative assessment tracks students' participation in discussions, fieldwork, and group presentations, focusing on their depth of cultural interpretation and value commitment. Summative assessment, beyond factual recall, includes tasks such as analyzing the cultural meaning of a given building or writing a comparative essay. We also employ observation, portfolio analysis, questionnaires, and interviews to monitor the evolving educational impact.

4. Outcomes and reflections

After a full teaching cycle, the reform produced observable gains.

- (1) Cultural confidence: Through systematic comparison, students moved from a vague appreciation of Chinese architecture as "beautiful" or "distinctive" to a reasoned understanding of its structural logic, historical continuity, and universal significance. Survey scores for cultural identity showed marked improvement.
- (2) Aesthetic and humanistic literacy: The course immersed students in architectural aesthetics through both visual analysis and site experience, enhancing their critical appreciation and their ability to articulate aesthetic judgments about built works.
- (3) Professional values: By studying how masterpieces embody ethical concern and humanistic care, students began to question "design for what?" Some expressed in their final essays a commitment to designing for broader social good, indicating early value internalization.
- (4) Resource development: We produced a complete set of revised syllabi, lesson plans, a case library of over 20 teaching examples, digital presentations, and supplementary visual materials.

At the same time, challenges remain. The integration of ideological-political content still feels forced in some teaching units, demanding more subtle alignment. The conversion of local heritage into systematically integrated curricular materials is still incomplete, and field trips are not yet fully coordinated with classroom sessions. Assessment tools remain largely qualitative; more refined quantitative metrics are needed. These issues will be addressed in subsequent iterations.

5. Conclusion

The ideological-political reform of the "History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture" course is an ongoing endeavour. Our work has centered on the dual lenses of aesthetic education and cultural confidence, and we have articulated four thematic anchors—heritage preservation, craftsmanship and patriotism, cross-cultural

comparison, and people-centred design—to structure the integration. We have also experimented with content restructuring, pedagogical innovation, and assessment reform.

Architectural history is not merely a chronicle of forms; it is a history of civilizations and of aesthetic sensibilities. The unique strength of this course lies in its capacity to help students see beyond stylistic changes to the cultural logic and value choices that shaped them. This is the natural ground for ideological-political education—not external moralizing, but the intrinsic questioning inherent in the discipline itself. Future work will refine the seamless integration of value content, deepen the use of local cultural resources, and develop more robust evaluation methods, so that the “History of Chinese and Foreign Architecture” can more fully fulfill its potential as a site where knowledge, aesthetic cultivation, and value formation converge.

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