

Original Paper

Singapore's Aesthetic Education Policy: Ideological Formation, Institutional Support, and Practical Boundaries

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Abstract

Singapore's aesthetic education policy is not merely a reform of school art courses; it is a policy practice formed across school education, public cultural services, and everyday life in a multiethnic society. Taking aesthetic education, multicultural education, and public cultural services as analytical references, this paper examines the conceptual formation, institutional support, and practical pathways of Singapore's aesthetic education policy. The study argues that Singapore does not confine arts education to skill training for a small group of students. Instead, it links aesthetic experience with cultural understanding, personality development, and public communication through curricula, teacher professional development, museum education, community arts, and family cultural experience. However, Singapore's experience depends on specific institutional conditions, including its city-state scale, public housing arrangements, and strong interdepartmental coordination. For China, the more relevant lesson is not to replicate individual projects, but to build stable connections among school curricula, local cultural resources, and public cultural services.

Keywords

singapore, aesthetic education policy, multicultural education, public cultural services, aesthetic experience

1. Introduction

Discussion of Singapore's aesthetic education policy often begins with art curricula, yet it can also be drawn quickly into questions of multicultural governance. The first approach is concrete: it makes visible curriculum objectives, teacher training, classroom activities, and student works. The second approach has a broader horizon: it explains why arts education in Singapore is connected with ethnic relations, national identity, and public cultural life. Either approach is useful, but each becomes limited if it is separated from the other. A curriculum-only account misses the social conditions behind arts

education, while a governance-only account can easily turn aesthetic education into an abstract policy slogan. This paper therefore returns both dimensions to a single question: in a city-state marked by multiple ethnic groups, languages, and religions, how does aesthetic education move from the classroom into public life?

Singapore is worth studying not because it offers a model that can be transferred without adjustment. On the contrary, its territorial scale, population composition, public housing system, and governmental coordination capacity are unusual. Its value for comparative research lies in the way it organizes policy: school art curricula are not isolated from teacher professional development, museum and gallery education, community arts projects, family cultural memory, or international cultural exchange. Artistic forms encountered in class may reappear in festivals, community spaces, museum visits, and family life, creating a longer chain of educational experience.

Theoretically, aesthetic education first concerns the organization of human experience. Arts education scholarship has long argued that learning in and through art develops forms of perception, judgement, and meaning-making that are difficult to cultivate through propositional instruction alone [1]. Heid's discussion of aesthetic development further shows that aesthetic learning is not only a matter of taste or appreciation, but also a cognitive process through which students notice relationships, interpret forms, and connect visual experience with reflection [2]. Multicultural education theory offers a parallel reminder: schools should not reduce cultural difference to external symbols, but should help students understand the historical experiences and value expressions behind different cultural forms [3].

On this basis, this paper does not treat Singapore's aesthetic education policy as a collection of art activities. It understands it as a practical structure composed of curriculum objectives, institutional actors, resource allocation, and public cultural services. The paper addresses three questions. First, why does aesthetic education enter the educational setting of a multicultural society? Second, through which institutional arrangements does it move from policy ideas to classrooms and communities? Third, what can this experience contribute to aesthetic education reform in China, and where should its limits be recognized? The argument of this paper is that aesthetic education gains policy significance only when it keeps a tension between individual growth and public cultural life. Once it is reduced either to skill training or to social mobilization, its educational meaning becomes narrower.

2. Conceptual Formation: Why Aesthetic Education Enters a Multicultural Educational Setting

The formation of Singapore's aesthetic education policy cannot be understood apart from its social structure. After independence in 1965, Singapore faced a society marked by complex ethnic, linguistic, religious, and everyday cultural differences. In such a setting, school is not merely a site for transmitting knowledge. It is also an early public space in which children encounter difference and learn how to live with others. Aesthetic education entered a broader policy framework not because art can solve every social problem, but because art learning can turn abstract cultural understanding into experiences that students can see, hear, participate in, and discuss.

2.1 Aesthetic Education Starts from Individual Experience

Aesthetic education begins with the student as an experiencing subject. In art classrooms, students encounter lines, colors, sounds, bodies, materials, and spaces. On the surface, they are learning artistic forms. At a deeper level, they are also learning how to observe an object, arrange impressions, and produce expression. When a student draws a street, for example, the task is not to copy everything seen on the road. The student must decide which building outlines, human activities, light changes, or spatial relations best communicate a particular perception. This act of selection already contains perception, judgment, and interpretation.

Research on Singapore's education policy has often noted that the city-state links schooling with national development, social formation, and future-oriented competencies rather than treating education as a purely academic enterprise [4]. Within such an educational vision, aesthetic education should not be regarded as an optional decoration of the curriculum. Through creation, appreciation, and discussion, it can supplement knowledge learning with emotional experience, cultural interpretation, and value judgement.

This does not mean that aesthetic education should be exaggerated. Art learning does not directly produce moral conclusions, nor can it replace systematic knowledge training. Its function is more indirect and more durable. Students learn to listen to others in collaborative creation, to explain their reasons in discussions of artworks, and to show respect when facing different forms of expression. A seemingly ordinary classroom conversation may contain training in judgment, expression, and social interaction. Aesthetic education belongs in the framework of holistic education precisely because it cultivates these capacities through concrete experience.

2.2 Cultural Difference Should be Represented and Interpreted

Singapore has long emphasized multicultural development, but multiculturalism does not mean mechanically arranging ethnic cultures side by side. Studies of Character and Citizenship Education in Singapore show that social cohesion, multiracialism, and cultural sustainability have been important concerns in the state's educational project [5]. These concerns are not aesthetic education policies in themselves. They nevertheless form an important context for school education and public cultural policy.

In school aesthetic education, cultural difference may enter the classroom through music, dance, images, clothing, festivals, and public performances. Yet entering the classroom is not the same as being understood. If teaching only tells students that one form is Chinese art, another is Malay art, and another is Indian art, culture may become a label. A more careful pedagogy asks further questions: where do these patterns and sounds come from, what kinds of family life, religious ritual, regional experience, or aesthetic habit do they carry, and how are they used today? In this way, cultural difference becomes an object of comparison and discussion rather than a display of materials.

Malay batik offers a simple example. If the lesson focuses only on copying patterns, students obtain a surface-level understanding. If it also discusses material selection, climatic conditions, everyday

objects, and regional aesthetics, batik becomes an entry point for understanding a way of life. Festival arts work similarly. A festival may contain lively performances and vivid colors, but it also connects family memory, ethnic tradition, and community relations. Aesthetic education brings such content into the classroom not to create cultural spectacle, but to help students understand the life logic behind cultural forms.

2.3 Aesthetic Education Should not be Conflated with Social Governance

It is also necessary to distinguish aesthetic education from institutional governance. Singapore's Ethnic Integration Policy in public housing requires a relative mix of ethnic groups at the neighbourhood and block levels in order to reduce residential segregation [6]. This is not an aesthetic education policy, but it affects the everyday conditions in which schools and communities operate. When residents of different backgrounds live in the same neighbourhood and children from different ethnic groups attend the same schools, art curricula and community arts projects are more likely to become real interaction rather than classroom imagination.

Religious governance provides a similar background. Legal scholarship on Singapore's Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act points out that the Act has been used as part of the state's framework for excluding religion from partisan politics and maintaining inter-religious order [7]. However, art education cannot replace law or administration, nor should it be expected to undertake all tasks of social integration. Its role is better located at the educational level: through festivals, rituals, images, music, and spatial experience, it helps students understand different beliefs and ways of life. Institutional governance sets the baseline of public order; aesthetic education cultivates habits of understanding difference in everyday learning. The two are related, but they do not operate through the same mechanism.

3. Institutional Support: Conditions for Sustained Operation

Whether a policy truly works often depends less on slogans than on institutional conditions. Singapore's aesthetic education policy does not rely on a single art festival or one reform project. It is supported by a relatively clear division of roles. The Ministry of Education is responsible for curriculum and teacher development; the National Arts Council promotes the public arts ecosystem; schools organize implementation; teacher professional institutions provide support; and museums, galleries, communities, and families extend artistic experience beyond the classroom.

3.1 Curriculum Provides a Stable Entry Point

School curriculum is the most stable entry point for aesthetic education. Research on primary art education in Singapore has shown that art teaching should move beyond step-by-step production and help pupils develop visual literacy, curiosity, interpretation, and critical reflection [8]. This orientation is important because arts education is directed first at all students, not only at a minority with special artistic talent. In other words, aesthetic education performs a universal task in basic education.

Across learning stages, primary education gives more emphasis to interest, perception, and hands-on

experience. Students use observation, drawing, craftwork, and thematic creation to understand themselves and their surroundings. In secondary education, courses and school-based opportunities may gradually involve more sustained work with materials, art history, design, project work, and aesthetic judgement. Research on arts education in Singapore also notes the presence of special pathways, including the Art Elective Programme, which provide more focused development for students with stronger interest and capacity in art [9]. Such arrangements are pragmatic: basic courses provide all students with fundamental artistic experience, while extended pathways preserve room for more sustained learning.

A detail often overlooked is that general access and advanced development should not become two unrelated tracks. If ordinary students only take part in superficial activities while interested students are quickly separated into specialized training, aesthetic education is divided into two forms: a lively display for most students and talent cultivation for a few. Singapore's curricular levels cannot eliminate this tension entirely, but they at least preserve institutional continuity between basic experience and deeper learning.

3.2 Teachers Turn art Curricula into Educational Experience

Curriculum standards, however clear, do not automatically guarantee classroom quality. Aesthetic education depends especially on teachers' ability to organize classroom experience. Studies of teacher professional development in Singapore show that the system relies on strong institutional support, continuing learning opportunities, and professional communities for teachers [10]. Within this broader landscape, subject-specific professional support for art and music teachers is important because aesthetic education cannot depend only on individual enthusiasm.

The work of an arts teacher is not simply to make students finish an artwork. More importantly, the teacher turns production into a learning process: how to guide observation, how to help students compare materials, how to form judgment through revision, and how to help students speak about their intentions. Many ordinary classroom actions, including questioning, demonstration, waiting, evaluation, and feedback, shape whether students actually enter aesthetic experience.

This point is crucial for aesthetic education reform. In practice, arts education is easily driven by the number of activities and the visibility of outcomes. Works may fill the corridor and performances may appear on the stage, but this does not mean that students have received sufficient aesthetic education. If teachers only assign tasks, collect works, and organize displays, students may have completed a result without entering a process. Only when teachers guide students to observe, try, revise, and explain does the work become part of education.

3.3 Public Cultural Policy Extends Aesthetic Education Beyond Schools

Alongside the Ministry of Education, public arts policy is also important in Singapore's arts ecosystem. The education sector mainly addresses school curricula and teacher development, while cultural policy attends to arts funding, arts organizations, community projects, cultural infrastructure, and international positioning. Research on Singapore's arts and cultural policy shows that the state has moved from

nation-building and economic-cultural concerns toward a broader emphasis on participation, everyday cultural life, and the social value of the arts [11]. This makes it possible for school aesthetic education to draw on resources beyond the classroom.

This division of labor provides school aesthetic education with support beyond campus. Museums, galleries, libraries, community centers, and public art spaces may all become extended fields of arts education. Schools can provide relatively systematic curricula, but they cannot cover the whole of students' aesthetic experience. Public cultural institutions, by contrast, bring art learning into more concrete social situations through objects, archives, exhibitions, spaces, and artist projects.

Public cultural resources do not automatically become educational resources. A visit without preparatory questions and follow-up discussion may remain no more than a quick outing. If museum learning is connected with classroom themes, artistic creation, or community observation, however, resources can be transformed into deeper understanding. The key, therefore, is not merely how many resources exist, but whether they can become educational experiences with questions, processes, and opportunities for expression.

3.4 Families and Communities Preserve Everyday Aesthetic Experience

Family is often placed at the margin of aesthetic education, but the earliest forms of beauty encountered by children are usually not classroom concepts. They may be festival decorations, clothing colors, music at home, the shape of food, handicrafts, or stories told by elders. Families from different ethnic backgrounds preserve their own cultural memories. These memories may not appear in curriculum standards, yet they continually shape children's early feelings about beauty, culture, and identity.

Community gives these family experiences a public space for expression. Residents can encounter art in housing estates, community centers, parks, and neighbourhood activities more easily than in professional theaters or museums. For ordinary residents, if art exists only in specialized venues, it is difficult for it to become part of life. The value of community-based aesthetic education in Singapore lies in bringing art into everyday space so that residents can watch, participate, and communicate in familiar surroundings.

This also shows the limits of school aesthetic education. School curricula have system and sequence, but their time and space are limited. Family and community do not have the same curricular structure, but they are closer to everyday life. Only when school curricula, family cultural experience, and community public activities interact can aesthetic education avoid being compressed into a single subject on the timetable.

3.5 Evaluation Should Improve Teaching Rather than Replace Artistic Judgment

Aesthetic education needs quality assurance, but it cannot be reduced to testing. Art learning includes knowledge and skill, but its most important changes often occur in process: how students notice problems, look for materials, revise work, explain expression, and respond to peers. These aspects are not easily captured by a single test. Portfolios, creative journals, classroom observation, exhibition dialogue, and teacher feedback often describe students' development more effectively.

Singapore's school supervision, self-evaluation, and external validation mechanisms have provided a basis for curriculum improvement and resource allocation [12]. Their value is not to replace artistic judgment with administrative evaluation, but to give aesthetic education a traceable channel for improvement. Without feedback, aesthetic education may become temporary activity. If feedback becomes too detailed, too forceful, or too quantitative, it may compress the openness of art learning. The difficulty of evaluating aesthetic education lies in finding a workable balance between quality assurance and openness.

4. Practical Pathways: How Art Learning becomes Lived Experience

At the implementation level, Singapore's aesthetic education does not unfold along a single path. Classroom teaching, campus activities, school-museum cooperation, community arts, family participation, and international exchange all perform different functions. They share one question: how can art be not only known by students, but also absorbed into the experience of students and residents?

4.1 Classroom Teaching Should not Reduce Multiculturalism to a Checklist

In art classrooms, Singapore can relatively naturally include the artistic traditions of different communities. Chinese calligraphy, painting, and festival arts; Malay batik, weaving, and traditional motifs; Indian dance, clothing, and religious art; and Western painting, music, and modern design may all become teaching materials. The materials themselves are not scarce. The real difficulty is how to teach them.

If the teacher only tells students that this is the art of a certain ethnic group, the classroom soon becomes a checklist of cultural symbols. Students may remember the names without understanding their meaning. A more valuable lesson guides students to ask why these forms appeared, what living environment they are connected with, and how they change in contemporary society. In learning batik, for instance, students may discuss dyes, cloth, climate, everyday objects, and regional aesthetics in addition to copying patterns. What they gain is not just pattern knowledge, but an aesthetic understanding of a way of life.

Classroom teaching should also avoid fixing culture too rigidly. Cultural tradition is not a static specimen. The same artistic form may have different meanings in family memory, ethnic tradition, tourism, and contemporary design. If teachers leave room for discussion while respecting facts, students can see the layers of culture rather than memorize standard answers. Such a classroom may not be the liveliest, but it is closer to genuine understanding.

4.2 Campus Activities Should Emphasize Participation Rather than Spectacle

Art festivals, cultural days, exhibitions, and art clubs are common forms of school aesthetic education. They easily generate visible outcomes and are therefore often described as diverse in form and rich in content. From an educational perspective, however, the activity itself is not the goal. What matters is whether students participate in preparation, creation, rehearsal, exhibition design, explanation, and reflection.

When students organize an exhibition or a performance, they need to divide work with peers and explain the meaning of their works to an audience. This process forces them to clarify vague feelings and place personal expression in a public scene where it receives feedback. For a multicultural society, this training is not simple. Cultural understanding is not formed by one-way reception. It emerges gradually through doing things together, explaining oneself, and adjusting to others.

Therefore, the aesthetic value of campus activities should not be judged only by scale or stage effect. A small class exhibition may be more educational than a large but passive performance if students have gone through observation, creation, revision, and narration. The key is to turn display into learning.

4.3 School-museum Cooperation Returns Art to Objects and Spaces

Museums, galleries, and cultural heritage centers can compensate for some limitations of classroom teaching. Classroom instruction often relies on words and images, while museums provide objects, archives, spaces, and exhibition relations. Research on the visual arts curriculum in the Singapore Art Museum shows that museum education can help visitors construct and reflect on questions of identity and culture when its pedagogy is designed critically rather than treated as simple display [13].

Wider research on museums as learning environments also suggests that children benefit when museum visits involve interaction with objects, adults, peers, technologies, and spaces rather than passive viewing alone [14]. The value of such spaces is not that they move the classroom into a gallery. Rather, they allow children to build early aesthetic experience through looking, playing, discussing, and making. For families, museum-based learning can also lower the threshold for encountering art, so that aesthetic education does not remain confined to school.

School-museum cooperation has its own difficulties. If museum education pursues only numbers of visits or activities, it can become formalistic. More important is whether students form questions before the visit, make observations during the visit, and express understanding afterward. Young children do not necessarily need to write complete reports. They may use images, oral narration, models, or new artworks to express what they have perceived. As long as the learning process is connected, the museum is no longer merely an extracurricular venue. It becomes part of school aesthetic education.

4.4 Community Aesthetic Education Occurs in Everyday Spaces

Community aesthetic education is one of the more notable aspects of Singapore's practice. When art enters housing estates, parks, shopping centers, and community centers, the way residents encounter art changes. Art no longer belongs only to theaters, museums, and professionals. It may appear in spaces residents pass through every day. This change may seem small, but it concerns the accessibility of public cultural services.

Community gardening projects can also be understood from the perspective of aesthetic education. The Community In Bloom (CIB) programme, for example, encourages residents to participate in planting, maintaining spaces, and greening neighbourhoods [15]. The beauty here is not only the appearance of flowers and plants. It is also the process by which people come to understand nature, neighbours, and public space through shared work. Residents learn cooperation, responsibility, and environmental

awareness through participation. Such experience may be less explicit than classroom knowledge, but it may influence daily attitudes more persistently.

Community aesthetic education is therefore not a simple extension of school education. It has its own features. Unlike classrooms, it does not always have a clear teaching schedule. Yet it allows residents to encounter art and public space repeatedly in everyday life. When art is no longer only an object to be viewed, but becomes a way of building community together, aesthetic education acquires a public meaning.

4.5 International Exchange Should become Comparative Capacity

As an open city-state, Singapore attaches importance to arts festivals, cultural infrastructure, international exhibitions, arts funding, and transnational cooperation. Research on Singapore's development as a Renaissance City has shown that arts spaces and cultural infrastructure were linked to the ambition to position Singapore as a global cultural city [16]. From the perspective of aesthetic education, the value of international exchange is not only going out or bringing in. It is to expose students to different societies' ways of making and interpreting art.

Internationalization, however, should not become another label. Effective international exchange helps students build comparative relations between local experience and external perspectives. Students need to understand their own cultural traditions, but they also need to see how other societies use art to express history, identity, environment, and technological change. Only when international exchange provokes comparison, reflection, and new creation can it move beyond display.

5. Implications and Practical Boundaries

The most common problem in comparative research is to turn foreign experience directly into domestic prescription. Singapore is a city-state with specific conditions of territorial scale, population structure, public housing coverage, public cultural service distribution, and governmental coordination.

5.1 Aesthetic Education Needs Both Curricular and Life-world Positions

Singapore's experience first reminds us that aesthetic education should not be reduced to interest activities, competitions, or campus displays. It needs a stable curricular position, and it also needs extension into everyday life. For schools in China, advancing aesthetic education requires curriculum development and teacher training, but it also requires resistance to the idea that aesthetic education is only talent education for a few students. It is directed at all students. Its basic task is to cultivate perception, imagination, expression, and judgment.

5.2 Social and Cultural Resources Require Mechanisms to Enter Aesthetic Education

School is not the only site of aesthetic education. China's local cultural resources are abundant. Museums, galleries, libraries, community centers, intangible cultural heritage projects, local opera, folk crafts, and urban public spaces can all become aesthetic education resources. The issue is not only whether resources exist, but whether schools and social institutions can form stable cooperation. One-time visits and temporary activities rarely change students' experience. Sustained cooperation is

needed if social resources are to enter curricula and learning processes.

This point should also be understood in relation to regional difference. Artistic resources and public cultural facilities are not evenly distributed. Some places have mature museums and galleries, while others rely more on local opera, folk crafts, vernacular architecture, and community culture. Aesthetic education policy should not be implemented only through uniform projects. It should allow schools to select appropriate resources according to local conditions. Only in this way can social resources avoid becoming a formal checklist.

5.3 Aesthetic Education Should not be Over-instrumentalized

Aesthetic education can indeed promote cultural understanding, social communication, and public participation, but it is first of all an education of human aesthetic experience. If its promotional, governance, or economic functions are overemphasized, the openness and creativity of arts education will be weakened. Policy design may have a value direction, but it should still preserve space for students to feel, imagine, express, and question. Without such space, aesthetic education can easily become performance rather than education.

6. Conclusion

In summary, Singapore's aesthetic education policy has been formed at the intersection of multicultural society, holistic education, and public cultural services. It takes school art curricula as its base, teacher professional development and quality feedback as safeguards, and museums, communities, families, and international exchange as extensions into public life. Its core experience is not the packaging of arts education as a grand policy slogan. Rather, it uses relatively detailed institutional arrangements to allow art learning to enter student growth and resident life.

Compared with studies that treat aesthetic education mainly as a school subject, this paper emphasizes the connection between classroom learning and public cultural life. Compared with studies that discuss multicultural governance in general terms, it also insists that aesthetic education has its own educational boundary and cannot replace law, housing policy, or administrative governance. Its theoretical value lies in clarifying aesthetic education as a mediating practice between individual experience and public culture. Its practical value lies in showing that curriculum, teacher support, public cultural institutions, family memory, and community participation must be linked if aesthetic education is to become durable.

For China's aesthetic education reform, Singapore's experience offers an angle of observation rather than a ready-made solution. Aesthetic education needs classrooms as well as life-world contexts. It should value local cultural inheritance while facing modern society. It should cultivate artistic capacity while also helping students understand difference, express themselves, and participate in public life. Future reform should further improve cooperation among schools, families, communities, and public cultural institutions on the basis of China's own educational system and cultural traditions. At the same time, further research is still needed on how to evaluate long-term effects, how to avoid formalistic

activities, and how to adapt aesthetic education to regions with different cultural resources and institutional capacities.

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