

# Exploring the Path of Moral Development Through Aesthetic Education Within Holistic Education: A Case Study of Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School

Dan Zhou<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School, Zhengzhou 450000, China

Correspondence: Dan Zhou, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School, Zhengzhou 450000, China.

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## Abstract

In recent years, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School has built a campus culture of excellence, developed an aesthetic curriculum system integrating moral education, and combined it with the school's moral education goals and the psychological characteristics of high school students. The school has actively responded to the *Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools* and the *Notice on the Comprehensive Implementation of Aesthetic Education in Schools*, taking the fundamental task of moral education and innovating aesthetic education forms to guide students in developing moral sentiments. This approach nurtures students' well-rounded character through an artistic ambiance, aiming to explore the path of moral education through aesthetic education in the context of the holistic education system.

**Keywords:** aesthetic education, moral education, nurturing morality through aesthetic education, holistic education

## 1. Introduction

Aesthetic education aims to cultivate students' abilities to perceive, express, appreciate, and create beauty, thereby encouraging them to pursue a life of passion and idealistic values. In the context of aesthetic education becoming a national strategic policy, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "We must comprehensively strengthen and improve school aesthetic education, adhere to educating people with beauty and culture, and enhance students' aesthetic and cultural literacy." (Gao Peng, 2021) "Educating with beauty" and "nurturing morality through beauty" are new requirements in the era, and understanding their connotations, exploring their pathways, and deepening the intrinsic relationship between aesthetic education and moral education are of great practical significance in cultivating the "Four-Haves" of the new generation in contemporary society.

For an extended period, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School has adhered to the educational philosophy of integrating holistic education. The concept of "Liberal Arts Education" centers on the development of the individual, focusing on the cultivation of rationality, intellectual refinement, the elevation of spiritual aspirations, and the fostering of personal talents. This approach seeks to achieve the unity of human significance and instrumental rationality. The school provides a fertile environment for students' healthy growth and holistic development, effectively fulfilling the fundamental mission of moral education, and constructing a comprehensive educational system that incorporates all aspects of development. Guided by General Secretary Xi Jinping's principles of aesthetic education, the school fully utilizes its strengths in both software and hardware. It explores moral education pathways by enhancing the campus environment and culture, establishing a distinctive aesthetic education curriculum, engaging in practical aesthetic education activities, and using aesthetic experiences to shape moral ideals and beliefs, thereby permeating the moral education philosophy throughout the school's operations.

## 2. Characteristics of High School Students' Psychological Development

High school is a critical stage in students' academic careers. With the improvement of material living standards, the diversification of social thoughts, and the development of mass media, high school students' psychological characteristics have gradually exhibited new features. Adolescents are undergoing psychological changes during this transitional period of puberty. If we can understand the psychological traits of middle school students and adopt targeted educational strategies, the effectiveness of moral education can be significantly enhanced. (Liu Huajie, 2012) According to psychological studies, the psychological development of contemporary high school students primarily exhibits the following characteristics:

(1) Exploration of Self-Identity: Students at the high school stage begin to explore and establish their own identities. They may have deeper reflections on issues such as their future, career choices, gender identity, and values. This exploration is sometimes accompanied by uncertainty and anxiety. Self-expression and creative demonstration: At this stage, students begin to showcase their unique personal interests and creativity. They may have a strong interest in art, music, writing, and other forms of expression, using these to express themselves. There is also a stronger pursuit of reason and freedom; high school students begin to seek independence and autonomy, desiring that their thoughts and decisions be respected by their parents and teachers. This pursuit may sometimes conflict with the expectations of parents or teachers.

(2) Social Needs and Cognitive Maturity: At this stage, peer influence becomes particularly important. High school students yearn to be accepted and recognized by their peers, and their social circles and friendships significantly affect their psychological health and self-identity. The cognitive and abstract thinking abilities of high school students are gradually maturing. They begin to engage in more complex logical reasoning, critical thinking, and problem-solving. High school students are also under pressure regarding academic performance and the prospect of further education. The uncertainty about the future, such as university selection and career planning, may bring anxiety and tension.

## 3. Exploration and Practice of Nurturing Morality Through Aesthetic Education Within the Framework of the Holistic Education System

Guided by Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era and driven by the core socialist values, the school promotes the spirit of Chinese aesthetic education and strengthens cultural confidence. The goal of aesthetic education is to integrate aesthetic education into all aspects of educational activities, subtly reflecting the effectiveness of education. The objective is to enhance students' aesthetic literacy, cultivate their emotional well-being, enrich their minds, and stimulate their innovative and creative potential. By doing so, the school aims to cultivate socialist builders and successors who are well-rounded, with balanced development in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education.

The *Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools* (2023 Edition) states that the fundamental focus should be on "cultivating students' good moral character and sound personality, emphasizing the promotion of the formation of good behavioral habits, and using the implementation of the 'Code of Conduct for Primary and Secondary School Students (2015 Revised Edition)' as a key measure" (Ministry of Education, 2023). This comprehensive and in-depth approach aims to advance moral education in the new era. Educators should explore and implement new moral education strategies with the goal of moral development, and under the framework of holistic education, investigate effective practical paths for "nurturing morality through aesthetic education" at the high school level.

### 3.1 The Integration and Penetration of Aesthetic Education and Moral Education in Subject Teaching

In the process of educational and teaching work, teachers in each subject should explore and utilize the aesthetic characteristics and moral education concepts inherent in their disciplines, using the approach of guiding students to perceive the beauty of the subject to enhance the educational value of the discipline. By immersing students in aesthetic education, it is possible to comprehensively enhance their core competencies such as cultural understanding, aesthetic perception, artistic expression, and creative practice. This enriches students' spiritual and cultural lives, making them mentally and physically more joyful, more energetic, and with more well-rounded personalities. Additionally, aesthetic education should also immerse teachers, enhancing their awareness and literacy in aesthetic education, shaping their personal charm, and fostering an appreciation for beauty in their professional lives.

Music and art subjects most clearly reflect the colors of aesthetic education. In music teaching, while focusing on the learning of music theory, we also emphasize music appreciation and creative teaching, allowing students to recognize and feel beauty through music, thus igniting their passion for music and beauty. Classroom instruction pays attention to integrating various artistic forms such as instrumental performance, folk music singing, hosting, and comedic performance, allowing students to experience the charm of diverse forms of art. In art teaching, students learn basic techniques for various types of painting, experiencing the artistic charm of

campus sketching and traditional Chinese painting. Students are encouraged to participate individually or in teams in various art activities, to experiment with different tools and materials, to learn the methods of art appreciation and critique, and to enrich their visual, tactile, and aesthetic experiences, enjoying the fun of artistic activities.

The history curriculum, based on the cultural ecological reconstruction of historical teaching, has developed a series of aesthetic courses. For example, exploration and appreciation courses emphasize the scientific consciousness of historical research, allowing students to master the basic methods of historical study through field investigations and the appreciation of cultural relics. These students are also able to understand the aesthetic values of different eras by examining the shape, design, and function of historical artifacts. In the geography and chemistry curricula, several extension courses have been developed, such as those focusing on brewing, water purification, and water resource protection. These courses are closely linked to students' daily lives and emphasize the cultivation of social responsibility, reflecting the aesthetic purpose of the teaching. Furthermore, various disciplines incorporate aesthetic education: literary beauty and emotional beauty in Chinese language teaching, logical beauty in mathematics, exotic beauty in foreign language teaching, natural beauty in physics, chemistry, and biology, humanistic beauty in history, politics, and geography, and beauty in movement and spirit in physical education.

*The Evaluation System of the College Entrance Examination* states: "Moral education and talent selection, guiding teaching, serve as the core functions of quality education within the context of the college entrance examination, cultivating students' essential knowledge, key abilities, disciplinary literacy, and core values." (Ministry of Education, 2020) Wang Guowei believed, "Humankind's cognition, emotion, and will are not independent but interwoven," highlighting that educational activities centered around aesthetic education can more effectively mobilize students' emotions and initiative, unlocking their creativity. When individuals unknowingly absorb the aesthetic values of natural beauty, social beauty, and artistic beauty, they naturally form their own aesthetic judgments, leading them to support and resonate with truth, goodness, and beauty, while resisting falsehood, evil, and ugliness. Maxim Gorky once said, "Aesthetics is the ethics of the future," which embodies the educational principle of nurturing morality through beauty.

### *3.2 Implementing Aesthetic Education Through Practical Activities and Campus Environment, Integrating Moral Education with the Holistic Education System*

Practical activities are a vital complement to classroom teaching and serve as another "main battlefield" for aesthetic education. A beautiful campus environment, while providing a positive learning atmosphere for students, subtly achieves the goals of both aesthetic education and moral education, playing a role in nurturing students in a gentle, trans-formative way.

In terms of practical activities, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School actively organizes events such as the "Sports Festival," "Disciplinary Festival," and "Drama Festival," as well as various club activities and school-based moral education programs. These activities guide students to create beauty, perceive beauty, and appreciate beauty in a variety of ways. Large-scale events like the "Sports Festival" and "Drama Festival" can lead students to appreciate the beauty of rhythm and strength in sports, learn how to express emotions, shape characters, and understand the relationship between beauty and science. For example, during the spring Sports Festival, which embodies the school's "sports-oriented" philosophy, the campus mini-marathon lifts the spirits of both students and teachers. The "iFLYTEK AI Sports Games" leveraging artificial intelligence motion algorithms and smart terminal devices for monitoring students' physical condition further enrich the event. In addition, the "Good Family" fun fitness competition with its ample equipment and challenging activities not only helps students improve their physical fitness but also cultivates teamwork spirit and the awareness of fair competition, achieving a dual success in both aesthetic and moral education.

Furthermore, in recent years, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School has organized academic festivals for various disciplines, guiding students to experience the beauty of knowledge and science through activities such as academic competitions, exhibitions, practical activities, debate contests, and current affairs discussions. These activities have become an important part of extracurricular aesthetic education. At the same time, the academic festival activities have also integrated moral education concepts, helping students develop core subject literacy, enhance their overall competence, and stimulate their curiosity and desire for exploration. This practice embodies both disciplinary and moral education.

Additionally, since 2019, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School has held three drama festivals with themes such as "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "Youth's Heart Toward the Party, Liberal Arts Toward the Future," and "Reflecting on Masters, Practicing Liberal Arts." Students, either individually or in collaboration with teachers, wrote scripts and performed plays. These performances explored three key areas: the drama itself, the centenary of the Communist Party, and the spirit of Republican-era masters. The festivals guide students to recognize, cultivate, and embody beauty, while simultaneously integrating moral education. This enables students to gain a

deep understanding of the unique cultural values of outstanding figures, such as Zeng Guofan's "Ten Commandments for Teaching Children" and the spirit of Republican-era masters. These activities help foster students' artistic creativity and appreciation, their moral values, and their patriotic sentiments.

In addition to specific activities, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School also offers a wide range of daily club activities and school-based moral education programs. The school hosts various clubs, including the Model United Nations club, the Youth Marxism Study Society, the Red Cross club, the Psychology club, and the Leadership club, as well as the International Department's Photography club, Animation club, and Cooking club, and the Xinjiang Department's "Snow Lotus" Song and Dance Troupe. These club activities adhere to the goal of "integrating holistic development and individual talents," guiding students to appreciate beauty, create beauty, and experience beauty through their involvement in activities, learning by doing, thus promoting their personal growth and self-realization.

Furthermore, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School utilizes its high-quality resources and platforms to carry out a series of school-based moral education activities. These include the annual "Learn from Lei Feng" theme activity month, the "September 18<sup>th</sup>" flag-raising ceremony and themed class meetings, themed studies on Zeng Guofan's "Ten Commandments for Teaching Children," and the spirit of Republican-era masters. These activities help implement the fundamental task of moral education, nurturing students in a liberal arts tradition, and cultivating individuals who embody both broad knowledge and noble character.

In terms of the campus environment, Zhengzhou No. 7 Senior High School continuously optimizes its environmental construction, working in collaboration with the school's TV station, radio station, and other departments to create a campus atmosphere that embodies the unique characteristics of liberal arts education and aesthetic education. During the course of the research, the school's environment has been progressively beautified with the planning and cooperation of the school's administrative office, logistics, and other departments. Currently, the school features a tiered plaza layout in front of the administrative building. In the first-tier plaza stands the "Mother of the Yellow River" sculpture, surrounded by one hundred sycamore trees arranged in rows, symbolizing the saying, "It takes ten years to grow trees, but a hundred years to cultivate people," and thus named "Tree of Education Square." The second-tier plaza is where the entire school gathers for the weekly flag-raising ceremony, aptly named "Flag Square." In the third-tier plaza, at its center, stands a more than three-meter-tall bronze statue of Lei Feng, wearing a military hat, smiling, and gazing into the distance. This plaza serves as an important base for moral education activities and is thus named "Lei Feng Square." The tiered structure of the plazas is designed to convey a message: to be grounded in character, to serve the country with dedication. Every flower, every plant, every brick, and every stone not only creates a beautiful environment but also subtly integrates the school's guiding educational philosophy, cultivating students' refined aesthetic tastes and fostering the qualities of idealism and responsibility in the future socialist builders and successors.

The school TV station and radio station of Zhengzhou No. 7 High School are equipped with advanced facilities and situated in a graceful environment. Every day, students read scripts and rehearse, honing their skills and enhancing their cultural literacy. They contribute to creating an atmosphere of beauty for the campus environment. The school TV station has been recognized as one of the "Top 100 Campus TV Stations in the Country." The bulletin board is also rich in content, sometimes featuring current political news and major school events, other times displaying safety tips and psychological knowledge. It occasionally showcases school activities such as commemorating the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chairman Mao's birth and promoting the concept of the Chinese Dream, as well as learning about Republican-era masters. The streetlight signs feature students' career aspirations and messages from teachers. The liberal arts Lecture Hall invites experts from various fields to deliver lectures, broadening students' horizons while fostering the "soft power" of aesthetic education, subtly nurturing the campus environment like spring rain.

### *3.3 Preliminary Exploration of Identifying the Shining Points of Aesthetic Education in Subjects such as Chinese and Music, Integrating Moral Education Concepts, and Realizing the Practical Path for Achieving the Educational Value of Various Subjects*

Taking the teaching design of the Chinese text *In Memoriam of Liu Hezhen* as an example, the teacher can guide students to achieve the moral education goal through appreciating the beauty of words, emotions, and the main theme in the text: understanding humanity and analyzing historical events (Lu Xun and the "March 18th Massacre") — reading the full text — summarizing the layers of meaning — identifying key sentences expressing the author's viewpoints and other notable parts in the text, experiencing the beauty of language (such as the use of function words like "ji (即)" and "he zhi yu (何至于)," which not only reflect the beauty of language but also convey the author's emotions and viewpoints, as well as the text's artistic approach of starting with the memorial service instead of directly describing Liu Hezhen's deeds) — discussing and analyzing the background — experiencing and appreciating the author's emotions (the beauty of anger, the beauty of solemnity,

the beauty of “I offer my blood to recommend Xuanyuan”) — guiding students to further appreciate the main theme of the article, extracting its connotations, and achieving the moral education goal (criticizing the dark rule of Duan Qirui’s government, remembering the always-smiling and kind student, mourning “the youth of China who died for China,” and praising the “courage and determination of Chinese women who, though falling, never feared”), thus experiencing the profound, solemn, and combative beauty of revolutionary culture, leading to the sublimation of character.

### *3.4 Building an Aesthetic Curriculum System Through the Teaching Practices of Subjects such as Chinese, Physical Education, Music, and Art*

In terms of subject teaching, our school has established an aesthetic education curriculum system that integrates core courses, foundational courses, and highlight courses. The core courses refer to the national curriculum, which our school delivers according to the guidelines set by the national education authorities, ensuring that the national aesthetic education courses are fully implemented and taught well. These courses serve as the foundation, standardizing the “beauty” in classroom routines. The foundational courses refer to the art-related subjects, including visual aesthetic education, thematic aesthetic education, interdisciplinary aesthetic education, and implicit aesthetic education. The highlight courses refer to Zhengzhou No. 7 High School’s featured courses. As a national civilized campus, a national-level demonstration school for the implementation of the new curriculum and textbooks in general high schools, a nationally advanced collective in moral education, and one of the top 100 demonstration schools for campus culture construction, our school integrates various educational resources from teachers, parents, alumni, society, and universities. Through activities such as the Liberal Arts Lecture Hall, where experts from different fields are invited to visit the school, the development of school-based courses, and hosting concerts, we guide students to recognize, discover, pursue, and showcase beauty in their learning and daily life.

The aesthetic education curriculum system of our school is shown in the diagram below:

### *3.5 Outcomes and Achievements*

Our school has focused on enhancing students’ core competencies in aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding. Both teachers and students have achieved impressive results in various competitions at different levels. Teacher Jia Yanling and student Wang Letian, along with other representatives, participated in the “Zhengzhou Reading New Ideals, Forever Following the Party” classic recitation event, where they won first prize in Zhengzhou and represented the high school group in a presentation at the provincial level in Henan, broadcasted live online. The moral education case titled “Learning the Spirit of Masters and Promoting Liberal Arts Culture” won first prize in the first Henan Provincial Primary and Secondary School Moral Education Innovation Exhibition. In the 2023 Zhengzhou Primary and Secondary School Aesthetic Education Competition, our students achieved outstanding results in multiple categories, including solo performances, solos, dances, recitations, class choruses, various painting styles, and calligraphy. They won 9 first prizes, 7 second prizes, and 5 third prizes. Zhengzhou No. 7 High School has consistently promoted the spirit of Lei Feng for 46 years. The school hosted an exhibition titled “Half a Century of Promoting the Spirit of Lei Feng” to encourage teachers and students to learn from Lei Feng and strive to become role models of the era. The school was awarded the Zhengzhou Advanced Collective for Moral Education Innovation in General Primary and Secondary Schools.

## **4. Confusion and Reflection**

(1) Our school attaches great importance to aesthetic education and moral education, and has carried out a wide variety of activities in these areas, which have received unanimous recognition from both teachers and students. However, evaluating the outcomes of these activities in terms of student achievements and the effectiveness of aesthetic and moral education remains a challenge. Therefore, how to design an effective evaluation method or tool (such as a scale) for diagnostic purposes has become a key issue that we are focusing on.

(2) Although our school offers a diverse range of aesthetic education activities and is rich in experience, much of the content is based on the school’s unique liberal arts education philosophy and platform conditions. The challenge lies in how to extract universally applicable experiences from our school’s journey in aesthetic and moral education that can be useful for other schools, even those with fewer resources. Furthermore, how to leverage the advantages of a prestigious school to have other institutions recognize and adopt our liberal arts aesthetic education philosophy is another dilemma we face.

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### Author Profile

**Dan Zhou**, Female, Communist Party Member. Master's degree candidate at Henan University, holding dual bachelor's degrees in Chinese Language and Literature and Journalism. A national second-level psychological counselor, senior psychological counselor, senior family education instructor, and a committee member of the 14th Henan Provincial Youth Federation. She has won the First Prize in the National Youth Essay Guidance Award, led and participated in five provincial and municipal research projects, and her papers have received first and second prizes in provincial and municipal competitions multiple times. She has won First Prizes in Zhengzhou's Quality Class and School-based Curriculum awards, and has been recognized as an outstanding teacher and a model of teacher ethics in Zhengzhou. Dan Zhou is also honored as an outstanding Communist Party member, an outstanding advisor for student clubs, an excellent Youth League Secretary, an outstanding Youth League Cadre in Zhengzhou, and an outstanding national Youth League Cadre. Her motto is: "People-centeredness is the starting point of all education."

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