

Article

Local Heritage as Pedagogical Medium: Dabie Mountain—Themed Art Creation and Cultural Identity Education for Preservice Art Teachers in Western Anhui

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Abstract: Could a mountain range become a classroom? It is a question I have been turning over since I first walked into a studio full of fine-arts undergraduates at West Anhui University—bright, dextrous students who can manipulate a brush with enviable skill yet often seem baffled when asked to connect their work to any broader social purpose. The Dabie range, wedged between Hubei, Henan, and Anhui, is of course a landscape, but it is also something else: a repository of twentieth-century local memory, home to more than 530 registered early-modern sites, around 1,200 catalogued objects, and a sprawling set of narratives that runs from the 1927 Huangma Uprising all the way to the foundation of the PRC. What follows is a practitioner's account of trying to weave that inheritance into the professional formation of future art teachers—not as decorative window-dressing, but as something closer to the core of how they understand themselves as educators. Drawing on classroom experience in the Fine Arts (Normal) track, on the practice of colleagues including Liu Lanting and Pan Wen, and on student works such as the print *Remembering the Glorious Years*, I outline a "localised, innovative, and collaborative" framework for culture-oriented art education. This is not offered as a rigid blueprint; it is a collection of grounded observations about what actually unfolds when history-inspired making is taken seriously.

Keywords: Dabie Mountain historical ethos; history-inspired art creation; cultural identity education; Fine Arts (Normal); preservice art teacher

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Some context, first. Jinzhai County lies about an hour's drive from Lu'an, and it is a place saturated with what I can only describe as a thick, almost tangible layer of modern historical memory. Waves of upheaval across the twentieth century left visible traces there, and for those of us teaching in Lu'an, none of this feels remotely abstract—it is, quite literally, the living memory of many of our students' own families. In December 2016, the Lu'an Municipal Committee put forward a formal articulation of what came to be called the Dabie Mountain historical ethos, emphasising qualities such as resilience, sacrifice, collective purpose, and local allegiance; its inclusion four years later in a national cultural inventory confirmed its standing as recognised regional heritage [1].

But what, you might reasonably ask, does any of this have to do with teaching someone to paint? Rather more than one might assume. The Fine Arts (Normal) programme at this university was established in 2002, emerging from the merger of the old Lu'an Normal School's art department with the art section of the West Anhui Union University. Our graduates now teach in primary and middle schools scattered across Anhui, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Shanxi provinces. In other words, they are the people who will decide whether the next generation actually encounters the layered stories embedded in the Dabie landscape—or simply walks past them. If their own training reduces those stories to slogans, the failure does not end with them; it replicates.

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1.2. *What the Literature Says—And Doesn't Say*

The English-language literature on this terrain is by now reasonably familiar. Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) made the case that aesthetic experience is not walled off from ordinary life but runs continuously through it—an argument that, conveniently, licenses the idea of artmaking as civic learning [2]. Tuan, some four decades earlier, had already furnished the phrase "sense of place" to capture how deep attachment to a locality can gradually reshape personal identity [3]. On the Chinese side, Xiong Hui and Du Wenqiang have done the essential groundwork of classifying early historical resources across western Anhui, producing the sort of statistical inventory—1,200 artefacts, 8,000 documentary items, 533 sites—that makes any further scholarship possible [4]. Wei Liang has, meanwhile, traced the developing arc of Dabie Mountain history-themed art from the "seventeen years" (1949-1966) to the present day, identifying the 2013 canvas *The Lizijie Uprising* and the 2021 diptych *The Long March into the Dabie Mountains* as particularly significant moments [5].

Yet—and this is the gap that genuinely keeps me awake at night—hardly anyone in this body of work pauses to ask a deceptively simple question: when a student physically stretches the canvas, grinds the pigment, or carves the woodblock themselves, what actually changes inside that student? The scholarship is strong on taxonomy and weak on feedback loops, on the reciprocal effects of the act of making. That blind spot is precisely where my own interest lies.

2. The State of Play in Western Anhui

2.1. *The Resource Base*

Let me try to be concrete about the raw material our students and staff actually have access to. Within roughly a hundred kilometres of the West Anhui University campus, the most recent figures I have been able to track down point to 268 historical sites in Jinzhai County alone, another 120-odd in Huoshan, and a further 145 scattered through Huoqiu, Jin'an, Yu'an, and the Yeji district [4]. Nineteen of these hold national-level protected status. Now, the numbers themselves, striking as they are, are not really my point. My point is that a student who grows up in this region quite literally has layered twentieth-century history in their back garden—and yet, as I will argue below, a surprising number arrive at university feeling oddly, stubbornly disconnected from it.

The artistic response to all of this has been, to put it kindly, uneven. A first wave of Dabie Mountain historical art emerged alongside the nationwide push to build local history museums in the 1950s and 60s. A second wave—if one wants to call it that—followed with the large-scale, historically themed commissions sponsored by the Anhui provincial government: *The Lizijie Uprising* (2013), *On the Golden Hill* (2019), and the two versions of *The Long March into the Dabie Mountains* (2021). These are substantial, public-facing, officially sanctioned works. Frankly, though, what fascinates me far more are the small, student-level engagements: the print made for a course assignment, the quick sketch done on a field trip, the sort of thing that will never hang in a provincial exhibition but that does something quieter, and perhaps more enduring, to the person who made it.

2.2. *What's Happening in Our Classrooms*

A brief word about the institutional setting. The School of Art at West Anhui University has roots going back to 1972, though its current form followed from the merger I mentioned a moment ago. The Fine Arts (Normal) major took its first cohort in 2002 and graduated its inaugural class four years later. From around 2015, faculty output in Dabie-themed work began to accelerate visibly. Liu Lanting's oil painting *Red Memory* appeared in the university newspaper in February 2021, and a theoretical essay she later published in the same venue—on the "creative transformation and innovative development" of western Anhui's historical culture—continued that thread. Pan Wen, for his part, has been productive on both the studio and the writing fronts. On the student side, the piece that really made me sit up was *Remembering the Glorious Years*, a print by Wan Qicheng and Zou Yiwen (class of 2020) that was selected for a provincial anniversary exhibition and

subsequently for the 8th Anhui Provincial Printmaking Exhibition, where it appeared alongside Liao Shanshan's **Absorbing the Past, Creating the Present: A Panorama of Anhui's Splendid Landscapes**. Both works went on to take first prize at Lu'an's "Hundred Works by a Hundred Artists" exhibition.

What got my attention about these particular students was not simply their technical competence—the prints are, I should note, very well executed—but the fact that, in their own words, they had "tried to walk into that period of history" by immersing themselves in archival photographs and handling physical relics *before* ever picking up a carving tool. That deliberate ordering—research first, then making—is, I will argue, absolutely central to what makes history-inspired creation educationally powerful.

3. Three Problems We Keep Running Into

3.1. *The Students: Skilled Hands, Thin Attachments*

To a person, our undergraduates are digital natives. They move fluidly through social media, pick up new software in an afternoon, and treat self-expression as the default setting. The flip side—and this will surprise absolutely no one—is a certain thinness, even a shallowness, in their historical imagination. Many arrive from well outside the Dabie region and encounter its past, if they encounter it at all, through the flattened medium of a single textbook paragraph or a ninety-second video clip. The familiar formulas of the regional ethos can be trotted out on demand, yes, but the recitation carries almost no affective weight. Nor is the situation helped by the "art for art's sake" posture that circulates so freely online, which makes it all too easy for students to dismiss publicly themed work as merely instrumental—something fundamentally separate from "real" art. When we set history-themed projects, the initial response is therefore too often compliance rather than commitment. The work gets done. It just never really gets "felt".

3.2. *The Teaching: Good Intentions, Old Methods*

Let me be clear about where I think the problem lies. It is not, in my view, a lack of enthusiasm among the teaching staff. On the contrary, many of my colleagues are deeply, sincerely committed to local culture education. The bottleneck is methodological. The pedagogical moves that currently dominate—outdoor sketching excursions, the replication of canonical works—are not wrong in themselves, but they are, on their own, inadequate to the task. Sketching a historical site is not the same thing as understanding why that site should matter. Copying a masterwork does not, by some alchemical process, automatically transfer its original charge to the copyist. What is conspicuously missing is a curricular architecture that threads Dabie Mountain content deliberately and systematically through sketching (Year 1), colour theory (Year 2), and printmaking (Year 3), instead of leaving the whole enterprise to the goodwill of individual instructors. The present arrangement is piecemeal, and the educational chain, predictably, snaps at the seams.

Then there is the question of scale. Individual faculty members do, of course, produce Dabie-themed works, some of them substantial. But pieces with the kind of high-impact, classroom-galvanising force I have in mind are rare. The gap between what currently exists and what would actually be needed to move a roomful of undergraduates, I suspect, is larger than we generally care to admit.

3.3. *The Regional Picture: Three Provinces, Not Enough Conversation*

The Dabie range, as any geography textbook will confirm, straddles three provincial boundaries. In principle, therefore, universities in Hubei, Henan, and Anhui all draw from the same deep cultural reservoir and could, if they chose, be learning a great deal from one another. In practice, they mostly are not. Joint projects remain few and far between, cross-provincial gatherings on historical art are infrequent at best, and the published literature tends to be duplicated rather than genuinely cumulative. A mountain range that ought, by rights, to function as connective tissue ends up functioning, more often than not,

as a border. This fragmentation is not, in itself, catastrophic—but it is stubborn, and it imposes real limits on how far any single institution's efforts can travel.

4. What Might Actually Work

4.1. Getting Students Out of the Studio

The single most effective move I have witnessed is, almost embarrassingly, the simplest one: get the students out of the studio and take them to the actual places. Not as tourists on a bus, but as investigators with a job to do. When our student association organises a field trip to Jinzhai—something it has by now done repeatedly—the shift in engagement is visible to the naked eye. Standing inside the memorial hall, handling carefully produced replicas of artefacts, listening to elderly residents recount their grandparents' mid-twentieth-century experiences: these are encounters that no lecture, however eloquent, can possibly replicate. The underlying aim is to nudge the student's posture from "I am being asked to paint this" to "I have something I urgently want to say about this." That shift, modest as it sounds, is the whole ballgame.

We have also begun inviting outside voices onto campus—figures such as Professor Lu Youcheng, a recipient of the Ministry of Education's "Distinguished Teaching Family" honour, and Zhou Shiyong, a nationally recognised model worker—to speak with students about professional ethics and dedication. These are not, strictly, art lectures. But they help cultivate a climate in which history-themed creation starts to feel like an integral part of a larger vocational identity rather than a bureaucratic box to be ticked.

4.2. Retooling the Curriculum

If immersive fieldwork supplies the spark, then the curriculum provides the fuel. What is needed is to build Dabie Mountain content directly into the official talent cultivation scheme—the document that dictates what gets taught and when—so that it appears not as the occasional add-on or favour from an enthusiastic instructor, but as a genuine through-line linking sketching (Year 1), colour studies (Year 2), and printmaking (Year 3). The precise configuration will, naturally, vary from one institution to another; what matters is the principle itself. Let the locality do pedagogical work across the entire programme, not merely in one isolated, optional module.

Interdisciplinary pairings, I have found, can be unexpectedly powerful. A joint session in which an art faculty member and a cultural-education specialist wrestle aloud—in real time, in front of the students—with what "history-inspired art" is actually *for*, does more to unsettle entrenched assumptions than a dozen polished PowerPoint decks. We have run a small handful of these sessions so far and intend to make them a routine feature.

4.3. Building a Cross-Provincial Alliance

The longest-term, and most speculative, piece of the puzzle is institutional: a Dabie Mountain Historical Art Creation Alliance linking universities across Hubei, Henan, and Anhui. The working idea is to coordinate touring exhibitions, circulate shared research briefs, and pool digital archival resources so that a student in a Xinyang studio has access to the same primary materials as a student in Lu'an. An "Internet+" platform would make the logistics feasible. Whether the institutional will to sustain such a structure actually exists is, I will confess, an open question. But the alternative—continuing to work in isolated provincial silos—is clearly, in my view, suboptimal.

5. Where This Leaves Us

The Dabie landscape, it seems to me, keeps generating a particular kind of artistic impulse—one that is historically grounded, collectively oriented, and, at its best, personally transformative for the young artists who engage seriously with it. The argument I have been developing here is that the Fine Arts (Normal) programme at West Anhui University offers a plausible and productive setting in which to test a "localised, innovative, and collaborative" model of culture-oriented art education. This is not, I want to emphasise, grand theory. It is, rather, a way of paying close attention to what already

happens—quietly, intermittently—when students are given a genuine chance to take history-inspired creation seriously; and then, on the basis of that attention, building the curricular structures, the faculty support mechanisms, and the regional connections that would allow those moments to happen more often, and to cut deeper.

The 2022 WXSX project that funded this research posed, deceptively, a simple question: how might one approach value education through the lens of Dabie Mountain-themed art? [6]. Having now spent the better part of two years on this work, I would venture a slight rephrasing. The issue is not how we talk about it. The issue is how we arrange the conditions—field trips, curricula, alliances—so that the talking becomes, increasingly, unnecessary, because the work itself has begun to do the teaching.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Dabie Mountain range is far more than a geographical backdrop; it is a vital pedagogical medium that can bridge the gap between technical art training and cultural mission. By moving beyond "art for art's sake" and toward a grounded, research-first creative process, we enable preservice teachers to evolve from skilled technicians into custodians of regional memory. The "localized, innovative, and collaborative" framework proposed here offers a sustainable path for integrating local heritage into modern higher education. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that when these future educators enter their own classrooms, they carry with them not just a brush, but a profound, lived connection to the history and identity of the land they represent.

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