

# Exploring High School Art Education in China

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the hidden adversities faced by students in a pursuit of art education in the Chinese education system. For most of its history, China has had a vibrant art culture; by no means should it be called art-diminished. However, in the past centuries, art no longer held its previous importance in conversation and education, and very few famous artists emerged in this era. In fact, the Chinese art culture was diminishing. This phenomenon motivated the researcher to approach the subject. Recently, most Chinese media reprimand art students for a lack of intellectual competence among other unique qualities in schooling, causing severe stress among many art students in China. Established research into the topic of arts adversity includes analyses of the unreasonably high expenditure to learn art, difficulty of acceptance into art universities, and ways to rectify the existing inequalities in the Yikao (an art exam for college entrance to Chinese university) process, but no research explores singularly the social injustice upon art education and art culture. Thus, this paper will specifically analyze groups of high school students pursuing art majors, the unique examination structures of Yikao, the financial burden of art education, and the government negligence in art subjects in relation to their contributions to the potential obstacles in contemporary art education. An exploration into the economical, institutional, and social situations faced by contemporary art students provides an insight into the authentic situation faced by art students in China. Through this research, the sufferings caused by the societal discrimination and financial burden upon art students can hopefully be attended and mitigated.

**Keywords:** Art, Chinese Education System, Adversity, Yikao

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For almost every day of their 3 years in high school, all Chinese high school students are preparing for the day of “Gaokao” (The National College Entrance Examination, or NCEE), an academic exam whose scores are used by all Chinese universities as the means to determine admission. However, alongside the renowned academic college entrance exam of Gaokao, an increasing number of students are choosing the “Yikao” (NCEE for Arts Students) to enter into their desired universities and majors. But despite its increasing popularity, Yikao has long been regarded as “the easy way out”, reprimanded for its classism, and shunned for its “impracticality” in Chinese society. The neglected truth is: high school students pursuing art education in China face great adversity due to established social and institutional structures.

### 1.1 The Investigation in Yikao

Since its establishment in 2002, the Yikao has been attracting about 600 to 800 thousand applicants every

year [1]. In 2020, more than 10% of all high school seniors in China took the Yikao [2]. However, amid these applicants, very few--in fact, too few--actually end up with a seat in a professional art university. Throughout the nation of China, there are only 48 art-oriented universities, called Art Classification Institutes(ACI) [14]. Each institute accepts about 500 to 2,000 freshmen per year, summing to the admission of less than 100,000 high school seniors per year among all ACIs in China. Overall, the acceptance rate of ACIs average at a 1%, comparable to the best academic universities of China and lower than many more universities throughout the world. At more prestigious ACIs, for example, the Shanghai Theatre Academy, the acceptance rate of particular majors can be as low as 0.4% [16]. In total quantity, ACIs account for only 3.8% of all Chinese universities, while Yikao students account for 10% of all high school seniors in China [4]. As a result of the insufficient number of art universities relative to the number of art students in China, at least 3 of 10 Yikao students will either not have a chance to study professional art or entirely lose the opportunity to attend college.

To study an art major in a college-level institution in China, a high schooler is required to take both the Gaokao and the Yikao exam. And “as required by the Chinese National Ministry of Education, the academic (Gaokao) score of an art-oriented (Yikao) student cannot be less than 70% of the academic score of a regular student; if the regular student scores 500 on Gaokao, the art-oriented student must score at least 350 to be accepted into the same university” [5]. In addition, along with being required to exhibit at least 70% of academic competence as regular Gaokao students, art students must also perform well on the Yikao. For an “art-oriented” high schooler in China, the Yikao score usually accounts for 60% of the admission process, while the Gaokao score accounts for 40% [5]. This almost doubles the difficulty for the art students: they need to study at least 70% of academic materials and also add 100% of the art competence as their peer applicants who only pursued “regular” academics.

To be eligible for the Yikao, a student must master some types of artistic skill, be it music, dance, visual art, or acting. But different from subjects such as math, language, and science, the subject of art is usually never taught in-depth at regular high schools. Dance and other performative arts may never even exist in school curricula. Thus, a unique situation forms: art students must seek education outside of their own high school to prepare themselves for the Yikao exam. It is not surprising that ACI students would report going to extracurricular classes every week for their chosen art genre throughout high school. To achieve the Yikao standards at ACIs, “75.5% of Yikao students [around China] spent more than 50,000 Yuan on “Yikao training” every semester in high school, and 19.2% students spent between 30,000 to 50,000 Yuan” [6]. Throughout this process, because Yikao is uniform in its format of examination, Yikao students are also vulnerable to eventually losing their creativity in the art subject which they pursued [7].

Despite professional training, extra supply costs also put art students in severe economic adversity. To all Yikao students, applying with an art skill in dance calls for the purchase of a dance costume, applying for the visual arts calls for the purchase of an entire set of professional art supplies, and applying for musical art calls for the possession of a musical instrument. But unlike pencil, paper, and eraser which cost no more than 50 Yuan, a set of art supplies, a costume, or a musical instrument can cost up to thousands Yuan. What’s more, these supplies, for the sake of Yikao practice, must be purchased and replenished constantly along with Gaokao exam materials. As a result, students pursuing professional arts education are virtually required to spend more than double the amount of money spent on daily supplies as compared to regular students.

From an evaluation of the extreme cost in arts education, one would reasonably expect that a larger percentage of students need financial aid at ACIs as compared to regular universities. Yet, that is not at all the case. For example, while the average percentage of impoverished students at Jiangsu Normal University is 26% among non-art majors, it is only 18.3% among the music majors at the university [8]. This clearly indicates the marginalization of the less financially-privileged student populations in the field of art. Students and society carry the mindset that “art student equals rich” [8], and therefore impoverished students become intimidated to study art before they even have a chance to realize their passion for the subject.

Poverty alleviation policies do exist at many levels in the Chinese government system --the school level, the provincial/city level, and the national level – but almost none of them provide substantial aid to art students. The schools usually offer reduced tuitions for impoverished students. For example, at Ninghai High School, a high school renowned for its college-preparatory arts education in China, tuition for impoverished students can decrease by 90% -- from 850 Yuan per semester to 80 Yuan per semester. Yet, this policy is not exclusive to art students; it applies to the all students at the high school. There is no financial coverage provided for art supplies, nor training classes. A policy like this is the primary source of burden casted on art students, for after calculation, it was found that even with a tuition at 80 Yuan, an art student at Ninghai High School still pays 5,600 Yuan more per semester than their peer who is neither impoverished nor an art student at the same school. At the provincial level, for example in Nanjing, where Ninghai High School is situated, there exists governmental subsidies in subjects such as old age, residence, disabilities, and illnesses of self or household members [9]. But still, no policy mentions arts education or art students. At the national level, the Ministry of Education has publicized many policies relating to “Poverty Alleviation in Education”, but similarly, no existing policies focus on the poverty alleviation specifically for Yikao students [10]. However, recently at the 2020 national Two Sessions Conference, the Chinese national government put forth that the “Education Ministry will provide arts education that fits the physical situations of impoverished areas” [11]. This is the result of the fulfillment of the state of basic wellbeing (Xiaokang) for almost all of the nation’s people. Because the standard of “Xiaokang” is met, the nation can move to cultivate its population’s growth in “Morality, Intellect, Athletics, Arts, Work” [11]. The statement accompanies tangible growth of national participation in cultural art events such as the revival of Hanfu, a traditional clothing of the Han ethnicity in China, and popularity of cultural art performances on national holidays in the streets and on national television shows. Because the power of Chinese

education departments is much concentrated in the Ministry of Education, a provocative action to amend the adversity faced by art students has the potential to bring future change to the field of professional arts throughout China.

### ***1.2 Analysis in Arts Education***

Arts education, as shown by the so few number of institutions offering it, has long been neglected by Chinese society, but its absence also gives an insight into the Chinese and global gender culture. In traditional Chinese culture, the subject of art is considered to be gentle and feminine. Not coincidentally, an overwhelming number of females dominate art majors at art institutions. For females, a career as an art teacher is seen by society as practical, stable, and not too domineering or burdensome, all of which are also qualities that suit the expectations for mothers in Chinese society. In recent decades, while the absolute measure of literacy participation has changed drastically in the last century to become similar between males and females, the measure of social view and expectation has not shifted nearly as much, and types of literacy dominated by females even become vulnerable to looks of inferiority from the society [12].

In a society where men are expected to generate the materialistic object—money—for the family and where women are expected to generate the emotional object—a loving environment and a pleasant room—for the family, it becomes intuitive that art, the subject most commonly associated with affection, is filled with young women. The phenomenon is a result of cultural pressure, and leads to compliance with the societal view for women to symbolize those qualities of the traditional women centuries earlier. And in the process, in a male-dominated society as today, more materialistic subjects such as technology are depicted as subjects of primary importance. Meanwhile, the significance of women's contribution is neglected for their intimate ties to women. Therefore, art institutions, for their numerical domination by women, also become tagged with less significance and minimal competence. And before they become masters of the subject, male students in art also are vulnerable to conjectures of homosexuality, another point of discrimination in the Chinese society. So long as gender inequalities continue and as women dominate art institutions, the negligence upon art education will likely continue.

Negligence of the unique situation faced by art students fuels inequality in social classes. Art is a subject that holds an inferior spot to subjects such as STEM, business, medicine, law. Like subjects of the humanities, art has been regarded as unimportant because of its introspection into humans and their society, rather than contribution. While physical contributions through technology and medicine are

important, the subject of art has no less importance in defining the core of humans, their romance, dreams, and mentality. The elimination of such qualities from mainstream expression in scholarship has put populations like art students in despair: their dreams cannot earn them a life living in this world. A simple comparison of the social and financial prospects between art students and students of other professions reveals the dire extent of injustice of the situation. In addition, even for students who do eventually pursue an arts profession, because these students have studied through years of standardized curricula and tests on a certain mode of artistic style, they may become isolated from their innate creativity. The existent system of art testing in China, although efficient and promotes equality among test takers in the academics, is not the most preferable method for art education. Therefore, to mitigate the adversity faced by art students, the society should first consider the subject of art in the same positions as any other subject. Only in this way can the reform process of education proceed in equal steps as the rest of wonderful subjects in the world.

It is known that a pursuit in art education is much more economically demanding than other forms of education, and it is also exactly this cost that has extended the inequality in platforms accessible to children in China. In society, The amount of available choices is always critical in determining one's actions. When a person is offered several paths in education, it is less stressful to choose any of the paths knowing that there remain other chances; when a person only has one path, they are more susceptible to failure and mental instability [13]. For wealthier families, affording high-tuition private schools and sending kids to extracurricular activities are always viable, so there is little concern in choosing art education. For destitute families, however, art education is not a viable pathway, for these families will not be able to afford a cost of education that is higher than the tuition of normal Gaokao students. This is the reason to the saying "art has no prospects" in China; an average family can only gamble to lose so much in the journey of their children's education and art does not guarantee nearly as a materialistically or socially promising future [14]. As time progresses, competition will only become more intense in the realm of art education for there are only few available institutions but an increasing student population. The scope of possible education pathways will only become narrower for the lower class. As a result, subjects such as arts education may become even more exclusive to the wealthy class, and in effect, a greater isolation and disparity between classes will be established. Furthermore, the mainstream of art will only be managed by the eye of the financial elite, art museums may only be understood by the elite, and art appreciation will diminish altogether in the societal culture.

Most alleviation policies today do aim to address the common characteristics that make an individual economically, socially, or physically vulnerable, and China is the same. Yet, the policies which have been created follow more the voices of mainstream society, and they are susceptible to neglecting the voices of some hidden minorities and the stories of their sufferings. Art education is one of them; the needs and sufferings of art students have merely been heard. China is in a shortage of professional art institutions and professional art lecturers, as a result of the negligence on the subject before the standard of Xiaokang was met [15]. Because of the lack of available institutions, its years of expensive training, and its lack of sympathy for the impoverished population, art education is slowly becoming a “rich’s game”, one that would one day completely close its doors to students who do not have the capital to afford both the best academics and art training. Out of a national survey of art students in China, an average of only 5.3% of students spent less than 30,000 Yuan in “Yikao training” [16]. These are the students who are struggling to keep their dreams. Yet, the Chinese education system does have the potential to reverse the dilemma. By its centralized governmental structure, an ideal society in the Chinese educational structure would ensure all students a spot in the classroom for years mandated by the Compulsory Education Law, implemented by the Chinese national Ministry of Education. The regulation of Compulsory Education Law has been effective as the Chinese Ministry of Education has the real power to cast direct control on all parts of the education system in China. By direct regulation, such as by mandating free art supplies and professional art lessons to art students in public schools, the Ministry of Education may be able create “equitable distribution” of funds and quality of education in arts education, and thus prevent a subject so valuable to human society from becoming isolated from the majority of society.

## 2. CONCLUSION

In Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Wassily Kandinsky wrote, “The artist is not born to a life of pleasure. He must not live idle; he has a hard work to perform, and one which often proves a cross to be borne”. Although a subject deemed less important than STEM, business, medicine, art can teach a student sensitivity, affection, perseverance, and creativity. None of those qualities are dispensable in the proliferation of human society. In fact, the expansion of arts education is essential not only for its existent lack of recognition, but also for its ability to revolutionize and mend ill perceptions on gender, class, and capital. Amid the sea of data collected, what is not researchable—the number of students who had dreams to pursue art but gave up as a result of a societal or financial pressure—may be the most pertinent of all. They are the people who truly

need help to access art education. But from the data that has been collected, it is evident that such populations exist, and they are likely not few. Therefore, knowing that the state of art education in China is struck by inequality and has kept many youngsters from chasing their dreams, we have an obligation to recognize our weakness and amend the situation.

Hopefully, as efforts of accessible art education play into action, more societal appreciation can emerge for the strenuous work of Yikao students, with it an elimination of gender, economic, and social biases in the subject and a blooming of art students and institutions.

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