Regional Characteristics in Oil Painting Curriculum: A Comparative Study between China Academy of Art and Central Academy of Fine Arts

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Abstract. This article sets the oil painting programs at two leading Chinese art schools the China Academy of Art (CAA) and the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA)—side by side. Relying on archive material, course catalogs, and conversations with faculty, it explores how each school's local culture, history, and regional artistic character find their way into classroom practice. The project blends numbers and narrative: statistical snapshots of course offerings sit alongside qualitative insights inspired by traditional freehand brushwork and expressionist ideas. A clear contrast emerges. CAA weaves classical Chinese techniques and stories directly into studio work, whereas CAFA favors a more global outlook grounded in realism and Western methods. Curriculum maps and teaching observations reveal noticeable differences in course balance, instructional style, and the weight each academy gives to regional heritage. All signs point to the same conclusion: the cultural ground on which each institution stands profoundly shapes how oil painting is taught—and the art its students ultimately create.

Keywords: Oil painting curricula, regional influences, China Academy of Art

1 Introduction

At present, my country's higher art education is still dominated by teacher led teaching. Whether it is the China Academy of Art (CAA) in Hangzhou or the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, the core of the classroom is still "one on one" or "group criticism" face to face guidance, focusing on teaching painting techniques and theories. Although this studio based teaching ensures students' solid basic skills, it ignores students' independent exploration and personalized learning needs to a certain extent. As far as oil painting courses are concerned, the traditional teaching process lacks interactivity, often fails to stimulate creativity, and lacks the cultivation of personal artistic language.

From the moment oil paint made its way into China at the start of the last century, the medium has followed a winding course that blends Western technique with distinctly Chinese ways of seeing. One of the strongest native currents is the legacy of xie

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yi, or freehand brushwork an approach that prizes the artist's inner mood over strict likeness. Centuries of ink painting taught Chinese artists that feeling can outrank form, a belief that still colors many modern canvases. That inheritance has gradually given rise to what we might call a culturally centered outlook: the conviction that an oil painting, no matter how "Western" its materials, should still speak China's visual language. [1]

Today, two schools sit at the heart of that debate: the China Academy of Art (CAA) in Hangzhou and the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. Both train students to handle oil paint with confidence and imagination, yet each campus is shaped by the soil beneath it. Hangzhou's long poetic tradition tugs CAA toward lyrical storytelling and classical motifs, while Beijing's role as the political and cultural capital nudges CAFA toward a broader, often more internationally minded, realism. [2]

To tease out those contrasts, this study compares course structures, interviews instructors, and runs the numbers on class offerings. By weaving together statistics and studio anecdotes, it shows how local history, regional taste, and long standing craft practices steer everything from foundation classes to graduate critiques. These findings slot into a larger national storyline: China's ongoing effort to absorb global art practices without losing its own accent. [3] The pages that follow lay out the research design, unpack the results, and consider what they mean for art programs in China and for anyone elsewhere wondering how place shapes paint. [4]

2 Methodology

2.1 Curriculum Content Analysis

Content analysis was conducted on publicly available syllabus documents, course catalogs, and curriculum outlines from both institutions. Particular attention was given to identifying courses that emphasize traditional Chinese painting techniques such as freehand brushwork and those that incorporate Western stylistic elements like realism and abstract expressionism 1. [5] Key thematic indicators such as "cultural identity," "spiritual connotation," and "integration of East and West" were tracked and coded to reveal underlying educational trends. In this regard, the theoretical framework provided by the historical development of Chinese oil painting and its expressionist characteristics served as a foundational reference. [6]

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Curriculum Structure Comparison

A key observation from the curriculum content analysis is the divergence in curricular focus between CAA and CAFA. The China Academy of Art emphasizes courses that integrate traditional Chinese aesthetic principles most notably freehand brushwork and

subjective expression. In contrast, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, while acknowledging traditional art forms, prioritizes a broader spectrum of Western influences such as realism, abstract expressionism, and a focus on technical precision.

For example, at CAA, several compulsory courses delve into the historical and philosophical underpinnings of freehand brushwork. These courses tend to stress the importance of capturing the "spirit" of nature and the artist's personal inner world, echoing sentiments expressed by historical figures 1. CAFA's curriculum, however, includes courses that encourage students to experiment with a variety of international styles, coupling theoretical art history with rigorous technical training.

3.2 Faculty Expertise and Teaching Methodologies

The analysis of faculty surveys revealed notable differences in teaching priorities and professional expertise between the two academies. At CAA, faculty members generally emphasize the significance of traditional Chinese art philosophy and the integration of aesthetic expression with technical proficiency (Figure 1). Many instructors describe freehand brushwork as not only a painting technique but as a reflection of China's deep cultural heritage and philosophical thought.

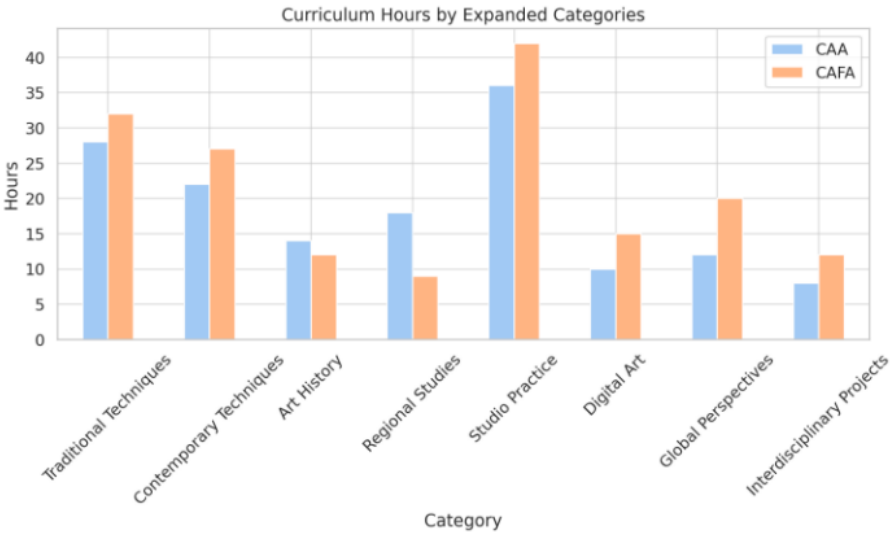

Fig. 1. Curriculum Hours by Expanded Categories

In contrast, CAFA's teaching staff are more inclined towards a multi disciplinary approach that combines traditional artwork knowledge with contemporary global art trends. This dual emphasis is reflected in the diversified course offerings and the cross disciplinary seminars offered at CAFA.

This flowchart reflects the differing pedagogical strategies: CAA's curriculum flows from a strong foundation in traditional cultural practices, whereas CAFA's teaching

model integrates a variety of techniques informed by both Western and Eastern art traditions. While both methodologies seek to nurture a comprehensive artistic vision, they underline distinct regional influences that are emblematic of their respective institutional philosophies.

3.3 Quantitative Analysis of Course Components

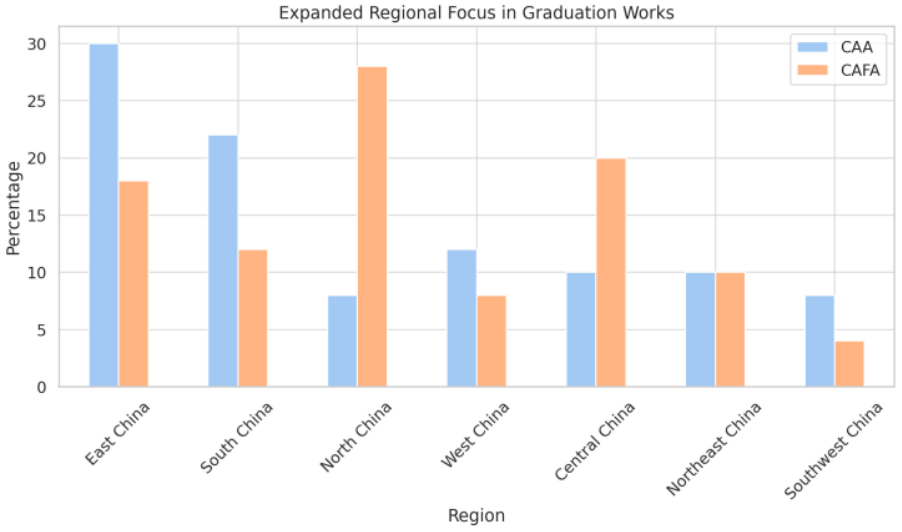

Fig. 2. Expanded Regional Focus in Graduation Works

At CAA, courses aimed at traditional cultural practices account for roughly 40% of the total credit load in the oil painting curriculum. It is interesting to note that while CAA's strength lies in its commitment to regional cultural identity and traditional methods, CAFA's diversified and technically rigorous approach has led to higher reported satisfaction with technical training among its students (Figure 2). Nonetheless, the high appreciation for culturally infused training at CAA reflects the enduring significance of traditional Chinese aesthetic values in shaping artistic expression.

3.4 Synthesis of Qualitative Insights

Conversations with instructors and their written survey responses add flesh to the bare numbers. At CAA, many teachers say their studio work is a direct conduit for China's cultural lifeblood. Folding freehand brushwork into oil painting classes, they argue, is less an aesthetic option than a safeguard for national identity. One lecturer summed it up: every lesson circles back to the ancient belief that humanity and nature share one vital pulse a notion traced to the Wei and Jin dynasties and still steering today's course plans (see Figure 3).

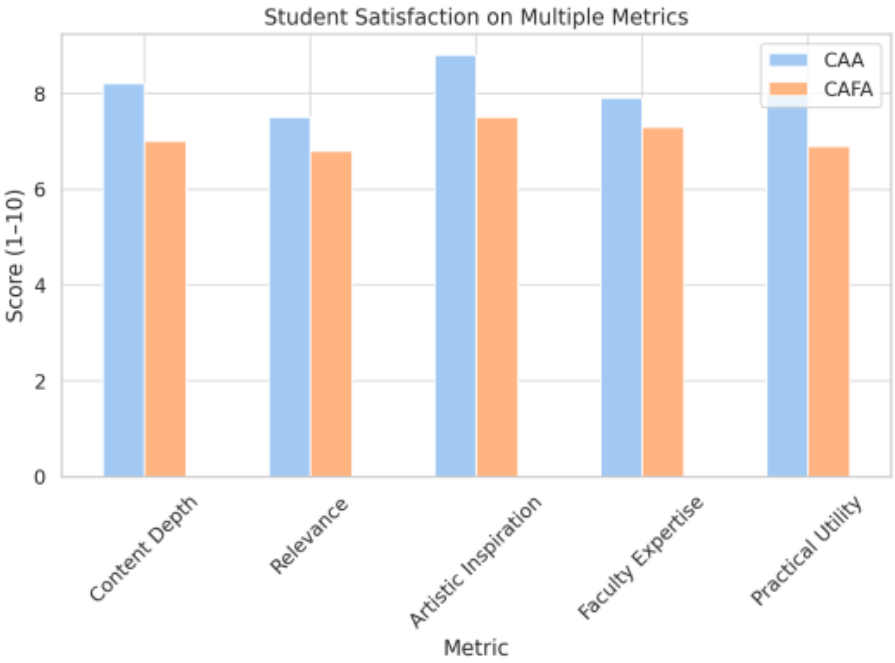

Fig. 3. Student Satisfaction on Multiple Metrics

4 Conclusion

This comparative study provides a comprehensive examination of the oil painting curricula at the China Academy of Art (CAA) and the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), highlighting how regional cultural influences manifest in curriculum design and teaching methodologies. The analysis reveals several key insights: CAA strongly emphasizes traditional Chinese artistic practices, particularly the use of freehand brushwork to express inner emotions and cultural identity. CAFA integrates a balanced approach that combines Western technical rigor with traditional art philosophy, facilitating an environment of international artistic exchange. Faculty at CAA prioritize the transmission of local cultural heritage and subjective artistic expression. CAFA educators focus on a multi disciplinary approach that equips students with both modern technical skills and an appreciation of historical artistic traditions.

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