

Art Students in China: Achieving Success in the Post-Mao Era

Nov 2020

At the Yan'an forums for Art and Literature (1942), Mao claimed that art should be exclusively for the masses and not the intellectuals or the bourgeoisie.¹ After Mao's death, attitudes towards art and art education began to transform in the reform period. This paper considers private art education in the post-Mao era after the return of *Gaokao* (state-wide standardized college-entry exams), where *guanxi* (interpersonal relationships) became a crucial aspect of Chinese culture.² The reinstatement of *Gaokao* facilitated the growth of what are called *huaban* or *huashi*, private for-profit art studios where students could grow their skills in visual art.³ While they do not belong to the state-run art education system, *huaban* has played a significant role in shaping young Chinese artists. In the post-Mao reform era, how is artistic achievement or success defined? What does one have to achieve to be considered successful? What methods and factors are at play for this goal? At last, what are the attitudes of these so-called "successful" artists towards the artistic content that they produce? This paper will argue that Chinese art students in the reform era are driven or forced by familial pressures and *guanxi* relationships with *huaban* teachers outside of the state-run art education system to succeed as artists. As a result of these detached methods for artistic success, these so-called "successful" artists have little interest, knowledge, or passion in visual art itself.

In order to understand how artists become successful, the definition of success in this context must be addressed. There are a few different notions of success for two different groups of people in China. For students entering college, success is defined as going to a top institution

¹ Mao, Zedong. "Talks At The Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art." Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, May 2, 1942.

² Osburg, John. *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013.

³ Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 60.

such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing for art. To do so, students have to get a sufficient score on the *Gaokao*, and pass the Art Exams that are associated with those schools. For post-graduates, success either involves getting sinecures and making art full-time⁴ or having upward mobility in some kind of business that involves art.⁵ One notion of success for post-graduates involves making and selling paintings and showing those paintings in galleries or exhibitions. Another notion of success is illustrated by the story of Wang Xi. After he graduated from Qingdao University's Art Department, he worked in graphic design. Eventually, he owned a small business in graphic design, was able to build a new house for his parents, had an apartment in Qingdao, and a pregnant wife. Wang Xi's upward mobility and a stable job define him to be successful, and his achievements are described as "ideal" or a "dream" by many parents and adolescents.⁶ The notion of success for both the students and the post-grads come hand in hand, as one is usually the consequent of the other. In other words, achieving success as a student usually leads to achieving success as a post-graduate.

On the other hand, artists who are not as "talented" become public school art teachers in China.⁷ These teachers usually work in state-run schools and colleges, and their work is usually unrecognized. They are mostly non-professional and part time and receive low salaries. As a consequence of having both little salary and respect from the students, it is not unusual for young art teachers to quit their jobs.⁸ There is a huge contrast between being an art teacher in the state-run art education curriculum and Wang Xi's case of running a business as an artist. Being in the position of an art educator was therefore not considered successful.

⁴ Kathryn Lowry, and Constance Wolf. "Arts Education in the People's Republic of China: Results of Interviews with Chinese Musicians and Visual Artists." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, no. 1 (1988): 89-98.

⁵ Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 73-74.

⁶ Chumley, 74.

⁷ Lowry and Wolf, 89-98.

⁸ Wang, Hong. "Understanding How College Students Describe Art: An Analysis on Art Education in China." *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 5 (2015): 08-15.

If success lies in getting into a good arts university and having an independent career, then it seems natural that art students would be encouraged to get into the top art universities in the country in order to succeed. However, being an “art student” is sometimes not up to the student. As the *Gaokao* tests students on “major” subjects (Math, Chinese Literature, English), the students who do not do as well in those areas of school are encouraged to pursue an alternative path, such as visual arts.⁹ This topic will be expanded upon in the sections below. While these students are still required to take the *Gaokao*, the benchmarks for art schools are a lot lower. Additionally, standardized Art Tests are administered to students if they wish to attend an art institute. Similar to the standardization and centralization of *Gaokao*, art tests became standardized as well—in the form of reproducing highly technical, realistic drawings and paintings.¹⁰ Art tests are therefore crucial in determining whether or not a student can attend a prestigious art university.

Behind the art tests and the state-run universities that administered them, private test prep studios called *huaban* or *huashi* became increasingly important for students who wished to take art tests. In these private settings, students spend years developing their skills in realist drawing and painting while following a highly regimented curriculum. Rather than creating anything of their own, art students develop their skills by recreating the same still-lives and copying from designated art books.¹¹ As the skills learned in *huaban* are the exact skills needed when taking an art test, attending *huaban* seemed to be a necessary condition for students to get into art academies. Then, the question of the art student’s success lies in whether or not they can get into a *huaban*. There are two major factors for students to attend a *huaban*, remain in a *huaban*, and

⁹ Kathryn Lowry, and Constance Wolf. "Arts Education in the People's Republic of China: Results of Interviews with Chinese Musicians and Visual Artists." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, no. 1 (1988): 89-98.

¹⁰ Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 60.

¹¹ Chumley, 78.

eventually, take the art tests and get into an art academy. They are familial pressures and *guanxi* relationships.

Since many Chinese families express tremendous anxiety towards college admission, they calculate a goal-oriented path for their children that will push them towards what they consider success. The “goal” here is to achieve success as mentioned previously--get into a prestigious art school and have a stable career. To reiterate, students do not always pursue art by their own volition. While there are parents that push their children into art because they have shown to not perform well in “major” subjects, other parents are anxious that their children might not be astute *gaokao* test-takers at an early stage. With their goal-oriented mindsets, these parents strongly encourage and sometimes push their kids to study painting (or other forms of visual arts).¹² Then, children begin the same kind of regimented artistic training under parental pressures in early childhood. This pressure for kids to exceed at drawing or painting further intensifies when they are around ten or twelve years old. At this age, children are sent to private or special art teachers.¹³ These “private” or “special” art teachers likely include those that teach at a *huaban*. Parents’ mindsets are usually as such: through attending the *huaban*, children will have a chance of getting into a prestigious school of *some kind*. If they do not get into a prestigious academic university, a prestigious art university would suffice. The example of Wang Xi is not only an example of success but also an illustration of how parents’ calculations can significantly influence a student’s academic life.

In addition to pressuring their children to pursue art due to their fears of their child not getting high enough scores on the *gaokao*, parents also take advantage of *guanxi* networks to push their children ahead. According to John Osburg, *guanxi* is sometimes “constituted out of the

¹² Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 70.

¹³ Kathryn Lowry, and Constance Wolf. "Arts Education in the People's Republic of China: Results of Interviews with Chinese Musicians and Visual Artists." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, no. 1 (1988): 89-98.

fabric of “traditional” social relations - such as kinship and native-place ties”.¹⁴ Osburg’s notion of *guanxi* is almost directly parallel to the descriptions of student-teacher relationships in *huaban*. Compared to state-run classrooms, the *huaban* student-teacher relationships are more “intimate” and “familial”. These relationships are also grounded in localism and kinship, as many of the teachers and students in *huaban* have the same regional background.¹⁵ As a result of these connections, the environment in individual *huaban* tends to be less distant and more friendly. Sometimes, the *huaban* teachers take on a parental role and treat their students as if they were their children. Other times, students refer to younger teachers as “jie”, or “older sister”. These examples illustrate the specific type of *guanxi* at play--namely localism and kinship connections. Families with the same regional background can send their children to these *huaban* at ease. It is also more likely that a student would willingly study art in the *huaban*, compared to the strict and tense environment in regular state-run educational settings. These environments seem to only be available to those within the existing *guanxi* network, making *huaban* somewhat exclusive to those who have those connections. In other words, *guanxi* enables the “path of success” for parents that want their children to succeed.

Osburg’s other account of *guanxi* is described as the “webs of social relationships through which an individual can achieve various ends” as well as “going through the backdoor”.¹⁶ Underneath the intimate and familial ties, parents take advantage of *guanxi* by “[going] through the backdoor” in order to “achieve various ends” for their children.¹⁷ In this case, the “ends” refer to access to private *huaban* and the path to achievement. To illustrate, parents treat *huaban* teachers to dinner and give them money with expectations of special

¹⁴ Osburg, John. *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. 25.

¹⁵ Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

¹⁶ Osburg, 23-24.

¹⁷ Osburg, John. *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. 23-24.

consideration.¹⁸ Teachers that have some *guanxi* with text examiners at provincial capital art academics are especially susceptible to bribes from parents. An example of this is the case of Teacher Wu. He explained that parents “[gave] him money that he would in turn transmit to certain [Art Test] examiners,” since he already had connections (*guanxi*) with those examiners.¹⁹ These bribes only come from wealthy families who can afford to “buy” their children into a good arts college.²⁰ In this way, only certain families that have enough capital can cultivate *guanxi*. Teacher Wu expressed that rich students are generally more “lazy” compared to the poorer students, who are more “diligent”. These poorer students were more “diligent” because they could not afford to relax and socialize.²¹ As their families cannot cultivate *guanxi*, their only way of passing the art test is to work hard on their skills. On the other hand, the “lazy” students can afford to talk, chat, and socialize. The importance of *guanxi* is again emphasized here--those rich students who already rely on *guanxi* can further cultivate their *guanxi* skills in socializing. Even if they are not working hard on sharpening their artistic skills, they can still succeed, because they can rely on *guanxi*. As shown, it is clear that certain *guanxi* advantages allow an easy route for students to get into prestigious art schools.

Another way for students to receive art education towards this goal of becoming a successful artist involves both family connections and *guanxi* connections of those family members. Some visual arts students’ parents are highly educated artists themselves, and some enjoy visual arts as a hobby. The family’s vocations inevitably influence their children: they are supported and encouraged to make art at home. Likewise, these students have a better opportunity to exceed in the arts as they have the resources to study art. Having parents who are

¹⁸ Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 89.

¹⁹ Chumley, 89.

²⁰ Chumley, 89.

²¹ Chumley, 90.

already successful in the art field also opens up opportunities for children--they have access to art classes, performances, exhibitions, films, and other “tools of the trade” for the various arts.²² In addition, the parents’ *guanxi* within the art network is necessary for students to obtain materials and find qualified teachers. Therefore, *guanxi* is utilized both as a family connection and as a way to find easy routes or “back-doors” for their children.

While parents do most of the work in helping a student become successful, these students’ passions, expressions, or understanding are not usually involved in the process.²³ As art is practiced tediously and repetitively in *huaban*, there is little creativity and expression in those art projects. *Huaban* also emphasizes pure technical proficiency rather than art appreciation or understanding.²⁴ Furthermore, there is little reason for students to understand art since Art Tests do not test comprehension. As a result of this lack of appreciation and comprehension, many students who end up attending art college do not have solid knowledge of art principles. A study on Chinese college art students found that most of them show a general deficiency in describing visual principles of any given work of art.²⁵ It is hard to imagine that one can be fully creative without having at least understanding the principles or the theories that might be behind it.

Even successful artists like Wang Xi claim that his professional work “has nothing to do with art”. In other cases, another art student Lin Xu deliberately said that he “does not like art” after claiming that he wants to go to the Central Academy of Fine Arts.²⁶ These examples show that many young artists who are on this path to success actually do not care for art, let alone be passionate about art. It is entirely unsurprising that these students would have negative attitudes

²² Kathryn Lowry, and Constance Wolf. "Arts Education in the People's Republic of China: Results of Interviews with Chinese Musicians and Visual Artists." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, no. 1 (1988): 89-98.

²³ Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

²⁴ Chumley, 76.

²⁵ Wang, Hong. "Understanding How College Students Describe Art: An Analysis on Art Education in China." *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 5 (2015): 08-15.

²⁶ Chumley, Lily. *Creativity Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 69.

towards art, as they are forced into a system where the goal is prestige--and has little to do with art itself.

As success is defined by having an artistic career in which an artist can support himself, parents utilize their parental authorities and *guanxi* relationships with private *huaban* for their children to achieve that goal. Students in China seem to have very little agency or choice in what they can do--as many of these students were forced into the art path due to their lack of success in regular academic subjects. Along with the reform that is called for in the state-ran art education system²⁷, private studios and institutions could potentially change their ways of operation to incorporate more practices that facilitate the development of passion and understanding of art, rather than raw technical skill. With how much influence private *huaban* seem to have on the art tests, perhaps *huaban* have to be the organization that initiates fundamental change in art education.

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²⁷ Qiao, Yingying, and Zhang, Li. "Chinese Environment or Western Environment: Which Choice the Art Education Should Make at the Crossroads?" *International Education Studies* 1, no. 4 (2008): *International Education Studies*, 2008-11-01, Vol.1 (4).

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