

A systematic literature review on the function of art education in China 2001-2021

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Abstract: With the government emphasising cultural creativity and art education, Chinese national educational policies and proposed reforms have privileged art education and reconsidered its role and functions. This paper provides a systematic review of 48 pieces of educational research and dissertations relating to the function of art education under Chinese context. Special focus will be put on school art education in the 21st century. Based on the inductive grounded theory synthesis, this review found that aesthetic cultivating and moral educating are core-dual functions which are consistently emphasised within all Chinese school levels. The individual-orientation and societal-orientation standards picture school art education intertwined in the functioning process. Furthermore, this review also examined the different focus functions at different school levels, and it illustrates four main thoughts commonly used to support the advocated function. They include traditional Chinese aesthetics, classic Western aesthetics, modern Chinese aesthetics in the 20th century, and Marxist thought on developing a well-rounded person. This review also distinguishes the problems that hinder the functioning of art education, e.g., utilitarianism, scientism, internal shortages of the art curriculum and the social view on art influent art education from well-functioning.

1. Introduction

Art education emerged mainly from various cultural influences and undertook various cultural and artistic missions based on different cultural contexts (Freedman 2000; Yi and Kim 2005; Freedman 2018). For instance, in China, a shared sense of the function of art education is designed to cultivate morality and foster the aesthetic appetite of the youth (Yin 2007). In fact, the policy background of the rejuvenation of art education dates back to the Opinion of Strengthening and Improving the Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era (2020) and the Opinions of Promoting the Development of Art Education in Schools (2014). These policies announced that China's domestic emphasis on art education has reached an unprecedented height and art education has ushered in great opportunities for development. That is to say, nowadays art education in China flourishing, still some basic questions need to be answer for its rising position. In this case, an in-depth understanding of the origins of the thought on art education's functions is undoubtedly necessary, as it would help is to be gain a better insight into the current situation and function of art education in China. A return to the previous research and representative understandings of art education can help explain art education's functions and originality. This research aims to provide an overview of art education and to gain a deeper understanding of the current policy's origins and practice in China.

2. Methodological approach

2.1. Review design

The systematic literature review can be broadly regarded as a type of research synthesis undertaken with one or more formulated questions, following specialised skills and certain research steps to

appraise and synthesise the research in a domain (Sambunjak, Cumpston, and C. 2017; Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2017). It provides a critical and rigorous way to appraise the research, which meets the purpose of the review – to identify the existing knowledge in current research about the function of art education with a decent and thorough the method. Given the range of syntheses in interpreting the data, different synthesis approaches fit particular literature types and may influence the result(Dixon-Woods et al., 2005; Gough et al., 2017). In this case, a synthesis method based on the Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen according to the limits types and amount of literature in China to date. In this review, the main research question has been formulated: what are the voices of critics, artists and art educators concerning the function of the arts and art education from 2001 to 2021. To specify the main question and make a research on it conductible, this review is set out to answer the following sub-questions:1. What functions of art education have been discussed in previous research concerning the Chinese context? 2. What are the emphasised functions of art education within different school systems? 3. What theoretical basis is the previous research rooted in, and with what method do they clarify the function of art education in China?4. What are the biases and limits of the current literature and studies?

2.2. Search strategy, data extraction and interpretation

Data collection: The search strategy is designed to ensure the search process is conductible and transparent. It includes the literature sources, online databases and other qualifications. The reflections in the review are limited to a specific time frame between 2001 and 2021, as 2001 is the landmark timing of the Chinese reform of elementary education and the whole educational system. The initial literature search was conducted on CNKI and Wan Fang data in June 2021. In the screening stages, 71 studies were identified, which resulted in the identification relevant to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Afterwards, a detailed quality appraisal was undertaken to further examine the quality and eligibility of these pieces of literature. Therefore, after careful review, a total of 46 journal articles and two doctoral dissertations have been obtained as eligible studies in this review.

Data extraction and interpretation: For each study, the definition, research context, purpose and research question, dialectical process, a brief description of the results, and the limits of the study were extracted in the beginning. From that point on, the literature review process was further broken down into coding processes following the elements of the said grounded theory(Charmaz, 2017; Wolfswinkel et al., 2017), yet the unfolding of data-coding was based only on the text materials, not on a predetermined theory. During the initial open-coding stage, the findings and insights in the text that are relevant to the research question were highlighted in all the selected papers. Sentence or paragraphs representing a relevant 'excerpt' were coded, and all of the literature has eventually undergone the coding procedure. At the final phrase, the reviewer reread all the codes and memos, afterwards this reviewer refined categories and made a selection with respect to developing an elaborate and comprehensive framework of the functions of art education in the Chinese context.

3. Finding

3.1. The dual-core functions of art education in China

Many particular functions have been elaborated upon in the studies; among these, the most frequently mentioned functions are aesthetic and moral education. These two are regarded as the aims and fundamental functions which are possessed by the school art education. Some scholars also proposed that the cognitive function is as crucial as the mentioned aesthetic and moral function; however, during the review process, the cognitive function is not emphasized as much as the latter two. Thus, we named them the dual-core function of art education and highlight the importance of these two functions that have been discussed in the research. Given the shared sense that the nature of art is aesthetic, scholars regard the essential attribute of art education to be aesthetic and the primary function of art education to be aesthetic cultivation (Qiao, 2009; Xu, 2004; Xu, 2019; Yu, 2016; Zhao, 2003). The art education, mediated by art-related courses and experience(Liu, 2013; Shi, 2007; Wang et al., 2012), aims to enlighten students' aesthetic emotions and to promote aesthetic literacy (Y. Li,

2007; Pang, 2006; Zhang, 2014) For it could transmit the basic aesthetic knowledge and skills through the art-related course (Liu, 2015; Yu, 2016), which is responsible for arousing the aesthetic appetite (Wang et al., 2012). And, art education can raise aesthetic perception (Chen, 2017; Su, 2005; Yan, 2006; Zhang & Dong, 2018), aesthetic appreciation (Xu, 2004), aesthetic practice competence (Mei, 2019; Zhao, 2003) and aesthetic creativity (Chen & Wang, 2015; Xu, 2004). Further, school art education bears the mission to grow students' awareness of aesthetics and form a view on aesthetic values (Wang, 2007; Yu, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015). The second core function points to moral educating function. Scholars state that art education is of great importance to assist and guide the moral growth of students (Lan 2013; Li 2007a; Jia 2015) . Therefore, the school art education is permeated with moral education (Du 2018; Lan 2013) that contains the inherent consistency (Liu 2015) of the aims and the modes of educating students. With the ultimate goal of cultivating a comprehensively developed person (Zhang 2015), art education and ethical education share the value of emphasising truth, goodness, and beauty (Yang, 2015). Their internal characteristics are consistent with each other. Particularly in the Chinese art education context, ethics and aesthetic functions cannot be discussed thoroughly when separated (Du 2018). In view of the modes of education students, scholars suppose that art education and moral education possess a direct, perceivable, intuitive and vivid way (Yi 2021; Liu and Wu 2007). The feeling of appreciating artworks contains empathy, caring, and other morally meaningful elements; it could be internalized into students' moral codes subtly (Xue 2005; Jiang 2012).

3.2. Functions depend on societal-oriented and individual-oriented standards

Individual-standard: for a comprehensively developed person. 1) Art education functions on knowing self and building personality (Chu 2009), it could benefit the individuals' knowing self (Zeng and Li 2020). The perceptual and upbeat personality can also be formed by experiencing aesthetics (Chen and Wang 2015; Liu 2005; Wang, Xiaolei, and Yanan 2012; Pang 2006; Yan 2006). 2) Art education is regarded to booster the individual' socialising, and it functions on the artistic curriculum process. The school art course provided a scenario in which one could acquire social experience when cooperating art works with others and learn communication skills (Zhang 2016; Yu 2016). Moreover, appreciating aesthetics also requires expression ability, which helps individual socialising (Li 2007b). 3) Through art medias image thinking developing and art education is assumed to promote students' intellectual development (Lan 2013; Li 2007a; Huang 2007; Liu and Wu 2007) and critical thinking skills. 4) Cultivating humanistic literacy (Chen 2017; Sun 2005; Jia 2015) is considered the necessary function. Art condenses a strong humanistic spirit and sparkles with human wisdom (Chen 2017) while art education takes over the responsibility to grow students' humanistic (Liu 2011). 5) Creativity-inspiring, as art education provides a liberal environment (Yan 2006) where students could multi-channel perceive artworks and gradually form imagery thinking-the familiar way shared by the creativity and aesthetic process (Liu 2011; Xu 2016; Xu 2004; Wang 2007). It could further excite the imagination, students' creating passion (Chen and Wang 2015). Most importantly, it could foster their innovative spirit in the future (Shi 2007; Li 2007c; Zhang 2014). 6) Emotional and mental health maintaining (Cao 2006), as far as the functions of art education being discussed in academia, are put up forward. Art education offers a path to entertainment and catharsis (Huang 2007; Xue 2005), encouraging emotional expression (Su 2005). At the same time, students could obtain physical and mental pleasure and liberal emotional experience (Yi 2021; Zhao 2003; Liu 2005) through art courses and activities.

Societal-oriented function: for a better community. 1) The economic functions of art education are reflected in its encouraging power for the art market (Liu and Wu 2007). In the wake of the art education boom, the art market gradually rises. Moreover, art education prepares the future talent (Zhang 2016) in the art market at the same time, which means it could constantly support the creative industry (Chen and Zhai 2010). 2) cultural function are often highlighted, especially the effects of art education on transmitting cultural knowledge and inheriting Chinese traditional culture (Jia 2015; Liu, Peng, and Xu 2019; Zeng and Li 2020; Shi 2007; Yi 2021). Further, art education is deemed to help the cultural atmosphere of the school and the community (Zhang 2014).

It promotes the new culture and feeds back to the cultural construction system. Li (2007b) and Du (2018) also suggest that school art education has an influence on establishing an open cultural mindset to diversity and promoting cross-border (international) cultural understanding. 3) Inevitably, some authors state the political functions of art education. During the school art education, artworks with political and ideological themes are chosen in teaching material and artistic activity. It is said to build up the students' consciousness of politics imperceptibly (Sun 2005; Zhang 2016). It could, avoiding the dull preaching on the political lesson, affect students through the emotional experience generated in the process of aesthetic activities (Ma 2019; Jiang 2012; Yang 2015). In addition, art education is described as engaged in constructing spiritual civilisation (Gu 2004; Yi 2021) and patriotism.

3.3. The theoretical basis of the researches about the function of art education

1) Preschool level: Experience and intellectual developing. Wang (2005) suggested that art education could develop children's cognition and motor ability through artistic games. Instead of abstract and logical, preschool children perceive the world and outside environment concretely and intuitively. At this point, creative games and art-related courses, like music or painting, could provide the characteristics of how children proceed with the information from the environment (Du 2018; Cao 2006; Chen 2017). 2) Primary and Secondary School level: Moral cultivating and creativity-inspiring. At primary and secondary schools, it is often endowed with functions of improving school cultural atmosphere and re-structure school life (Ma 2019). Basic artistic competence training is also mentioned in this stage. Several studies have investigated the functions are that of enhancing students' sense of aesthetic experience, developing students' imagination and creativity (Chen 2017) and building students' personalities. 3) Higher education: functions towards the different tracks. For those professional training aims to educate creative and well-trained workforces for the art or culture sector and cultivate future educators and researchers in artistic fields (Wang 2007; Xu 2019). These majors also require professional talents with high-quality professional skills able to innovate. Building on artistic literacy, skills, professionalism accumulation, the talent could gradually devote themselves to the art creation (Zhang 2016). In this case, art education is deemed part of general literacy education. Although, on the one hand, the most frequently mentioned functions are still moral educating, public art education is said as a mediation approaching moral education. While on the other hand, it is also embodied to popularise artistic knowledge, developing students' aesthetic personalities (Zhang and Dong 2018) and aesthetic ability (Li 2007a; Chen and Wang 2015; Zhao 2003)

3.4. The theoretical basis of the researches about the function of art education

1) Traditional Chinese aesthetics represented by Confucian aesthetics. Represented by Confucian aesthetics, it provides a basis for scholars to expound on the function of art education. Unlike Western aesthetic theories, traditional Chinese aesthetics integrated a set of aesthetic concepts with ethics and cosmology (Yi 2021). It is rather a holistic view of the unity of man, society, and nature than pure aesthetics. It embodies the high internal consistency of goodness and beauty in Confucian aesthetics (Zhu 2004; Chen 2017; Du 2018). Art education is deemed to purify people's physics and mind, perfect one's morals and ultimately create a harmonious and well-developed personality (Zeng and Li 2020). On the other hand, it could promote social stability, governance, and educate a harmonious society (Fu 2016; Liu 2015). 2) Western classic aesthetics represented by Schiller. Researchers often define aesthetic education according to Schiller's term (Jia 2015; Pang 2006). When discussing the personality-building function of art education, they usually refer to Schiller's argument. According to Schiller's view (noted by reviewers), art and art education are the best means to resolve the division of humans and modern society and regulate the relationship between sensibility and rationality (Chen, 2017; Yi, 2021), and finally lead to liberty. In addition, research often refers to Kant's classic aesthetics and Dewey's experience aesthetic thought to defend the aesthetic function of art education. 3) 'Replacing religion faith with aesthetic education'- Chinese aesthetic education thoughts in the 20th century. Researchers often quote Chinese aesthetic education thoughts in the 20th century to elaborate on the function of art education. In the early 20th century,

when China was under long-standing debility and enduring impoverishment, modern Chinese aesthetic thought was established by Tsai Yuen-Pei, Wang Guowei, Liangqichao, and Zhu Guangqian(Du 2018). Combining aesthetics and social reality, they integrated western aesthetics and traditional Chinese aesthetics(Yu 2016) The societal function of art education is highlighted(Liu, Peng, and Xu 2019). 4) Marx's thought of developing a well-rounded person. It is the theoretical basis of the whole Chinese education and curriculum system which constructs the goal of contemporary Chinese education and provides a guideline of the educational policy. It is commonly cited by researchers(Zhang and Dong 2018) that a fully developed person is one whose mind and body, individuality and sociality are developed universally, comprehensively and liberally. In fact, Marx's thought constituted the dialectical basis of some search.

3.5. The plight in functioning art education

1) The utilitarianism trend in educational practice damage the diverse functions of art education. A variety of studies claims that the utilitarianism trend in the educational practice takes responsibly for art education's insufficient functioning(Yu 2016; Yi 2021; Zhang, Bi, and Liu 2015; Mei 2019; Qiao 2009; Wang, Xiaolei, and Yanan 2012; Wang 2005; Li 2007a). This utilitarianism erased the intrinsic unique value of art education. It distorted the evaluation context of art education in China(Yi 2021). 2) The exam-oriented education, namely the scientism in curriculum, marginalise art education among the whole educational system. As some researchers point out, China's education is run by scientism for the long term(Qiao 2009; Mei 2019). Art education is locked in an edge position(Wang, Xiaolei), especially in secondary schools. Although the importance of art education has been addressed by academia and policy, in practice ,art education is still lagging. 3)The internal problem within art education weakens the function of art education. According to Wang(2005), the teacher-centrism and teaching method lead to formalization instead of awakening students' interests in art. Moreover, the lack of teachers(especially in rural areas), the lack of resources of the art curriculum and the difficulty in evaluation also impacted (Qiao 2009). 4)The vulgar social view of art offsets the function of art education. Some pointed out that commercialization, materialism, and hedonism are wildly spread(Lan 2013). The issue is that the vulgar idea of art has influenced the young generation, especially teenagers (Zhang, Bi, and Liu 2015).

4. Conclusion

The review highlighted different functions of art education elaborated in the research in China, from 2001 to 2021. As shown in the selected papers, aesthetic cultivating and moral educating are core-dual functions which are consistently emphasised within all school levels and advocated mainly by researchers. There seems to be various functions based on individual and societal orientations, and at all school levels contains coherent functions but with different focuses. Additionally, this review also covers the theoretical basis of the research about the function of art education: traditional Chinese aesthetics represented by Confucian aesthetics, classic Western aesthetics, and Marx's thought on developing a well-rounded person According to the reviewed studies, there are challenging realistic problems that hindered the school art education from good functioning: the utilitarianism trend, the marginalisation of art education, the internal problems within the art curriculum, the debate between the theoretical basis and the change of artistic views in society. building on these, this reviewer examined the limitation and biases against the reviewed studies for the following points. 1)Firstly, at present, few research studies on the function of art education in China is biased towards theory. It has not formed a mature theoretical system and research methods. 2)Secondly, The current research pieces strongly relate to the educational policy. The interpretation of the function of art education depends on the government policy guidance and policy discourse. Nonetheless, almost no research takes policy discourse as the research object. There is no theoretical analysis of the expectations of the function of art education in policy discourse in the current study.3)The discussion on the function of art is mainly at the higher school level, while the discussion at different schools remains sparse. Still, this review is subject to certain limitations. For instance, although the reviewer tried to screen all the relevant eligible literature as possible, the findings above may be insufficient because some

weight literature may not have been picked up with the search strategy, and the dissertation of the postgraduate level was excluded. Moreover, inevitably by using grounded theory, this reviewer's standpoints and prejudices may also influence the findings to be somewhat subjective, which means the result of this review could not be re-conducted by other researchers interested in this topic. Considering the research finding and the limitation in current literature, some suggested avenues for future research are as follows: 1) Researchers could develop research paradigms by applying empirical methods such would help build the practical basis. 2) More research needs to be conducted at primary school and secondary school. There is only a little research focus on the stages before higher education. There is already a calling for art education at the elementary level, which requires more research. 3) The researcher should pay attention to the stakeholders engaged in the art education practice and take their views of the function of art education into account and involve them in the research. 4) Research aiming to investigate the policy can be further conducted to understand the particular vision of the function of art education from the government. Despite its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the functions of art education in China's school context since no other systematic literature review has been conducted so far investigating this theme and focusing on the Chinese context.

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