

Art Education and Teaching From the Perspective of Chinese Mass Higher Education

GUO Lei^{[a],*}

^[a]Department of Arts, Ludong University, Yantai, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

For the reason of enrollment expansion for years, the scale of higher education in China has been enlarged rapidly. It brings about a series of problems including bad schooling conditions, not enough teaching staff, declining quality of teaching and greater employment pressure. The theoretical study on the development of Chinese higher education also lags behind comparatively. This paper analyzes the main aspects changed in the educational concepts of Chinese art colleges and universities and summarizes several problems currently existing in the art education and teaching in Chinese higher education. It indicates that for the art education in Chinese colleges and universities, the features of art and various orientations as well as the law of development shall be adequately respected and followed and a teaching quality evaluation system shall be established. It additionally indicates that the art education shall return to the talent training mode which focuses on the elite education to build the platform for training senior artistic professionals.

Key words: Art education; Theory; Talent training mode

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INTRODUCTION

For the reason of enrollment expansion for years, the scale of higher education in China has been enlarged rapidly. The statistical data from the Ministry of Education

indicates that the scale of college enrollment was only 1,080,000 persons in 1996 but this number was increased to be 5,400,000 in 2006. The total number of college students at school reached 25,000,000, four times as large as that in 1998. In terms of absolute quantity, China has the second largest number of people with college education background in the world and the largest number of college students at school. As the foundation for China's modernization process, China's higher education has made leaping development in the past few years, although the investment in higher education in China was far less than enough. The gross enrollment rate of higher education is as high as 22%. Measured by general international standard, China's higher education has entered into the phase of mass education.

1. THE RAPID EXPANSION OF THE SCALE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

The rapid expansion of the scale of higher education and the fast increase of enrollment rate greatly increase the chance for common people to receive higher education and improve the level of HRD (human resource development). It plays an important role in the transformation from the populous country to the country rich in human resource.

However, while colleges and universities constantly enlarge the number of enrollment, increase the admission rate and expand the scale of schooling, many problems such as bad schooling conditions, not enough teaching staff, declining quality of teaching and greater employment pressure gradually come out and become the main obstacles hindering the continuous, stable, healthy and harmonious development of higher education. Meanwhile, the imbalance between the enrollment of different disciplines and specialties and other factors including the regional imbalance in terms of higher education may also cause the great difference between the numbers and ratios of the talents output and the demand

for talents. It also causes the relation of HR demand and supply develops in two opposite ways: the pinch or shortage and the surplus of talents.

Correspondingly, the theoretical study on the development of Chinese higher education comparatively lags behind. The theory on “the development of higher education” created by Martin Trow in the 1970s based on the education development history of the United States and developed countries in Europe is, to some extent, the main theoretical basis for relevant higher education agencies to make decisions. The theoretical research system which is combined with the development conditions of China’s social and economic development and the development history of Chinese higher education and can guide the actual practice is still not established. It is inevitable that the short-sighted optimism is bred. More and more utilitarian concepts for schooling are accordingly produced in higher education system. It is exemplified by the great changes in the education concepts of art colleges and universities in China.

2. CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION CONCEPTS OF ART COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA

Changes in the education concepts of art colleges and universities in China are shown as follows:

2.1 The Randomness of Specialties Opened in Art Colleges and Universities and the Continuous Expansion of Enrollment Objectively Push the Abnormal Increase in the Quantity of Applications

The particularity of art determines the relatively harsher conditions for opening specialties. In the historical period, the cultivation of artistic talents has been following the mode of elite education in China. The specialties concerning art were mainly opened in art colleges and “8 fine arts colleges” were the places for training artistic talents. For the relative purity and independence of specialties, it was easy for these schools to unify their schooling ideas such as the objective of talent cultivation. Besides, the schooling conditions, teaching staff, the talent training mode and the education and teaching methods were also improved based on the features of these specialties. These colleges had best artists and artistic educators all over the nation. Meanwhile, they developed and employed different but flexible policy for student enrollment to admit and cultivate the students with special artistic talent. The student-teacher ratio once broke 1:1, the standard for international art education. They have cultivated a great number of talents for the development of Chinese arts.

In recent years, considering the demand for artistic talents and a series of policies such as enrollment expansion, comprehensive universities, normal universities and multi-disciplinary or single-disciplinary universities

have established their own department of arts one after another and opened related specialties. Both the scale and the speed of development are unprecedented. Up to 2002, among 1,080 universities offering undergraduate programs, 597 of them have set up the art specialties; up to 2006, most of colleges and universities in China have set up art specialties. The higher art education in China blossoms and embarks on the way of diversified development.

Although the reasons for which colleges and universities set up art specialties are different, they can be summarized in the following aspects: a) the demand for artistic talents due to the rapid development of social culture and economy; b) the need of comprehensive universities for establishing a perfect discipline and specialty system; c) the need of colleges and universities for the enrollment expansion and the creation of new growth point; d) the need for the increase of schooling effectiveness and gains.

The unconventional development speed of art specialties established in colleges and universities objectively accelerates the sharp increase of applications for art education and leads to “hot art examination”. The learning motivation of candidates has fundamentally changed, which has evolved into a real social problem. The utilitarian purposes such as “receive college education by going to art colleges”, “go to famous universities”, “short-sighted optimism about future employment environment” as well as “be super stars in the prosperity of art market” result in the declining quality of applicants for art specialties.

Seen from the enrollment rates, the rapid increase of applicants for art specialties creates unprecedented opportunity for the art departments of colleges and universities to increase the quality of students. By means of controlled enrollment, more outstanding talents are chosen to have further study in the palace of art. No wonder it should contribute to another peak in the development of China’s art education. However, the fact is different. Considering the rapid increase of applications, some colleges and universities violate the law of schooling for art specialties and blindly increase the specialties and the orientations to enlarge the number of enrollment, even if some conditions are still not satisfied. The contradiction inevitably comes into being between the increased number of students at school and severely insufficient educational and teaching resources such as bad schooling conditions and insufficient teaching staff directly leads to the great decline of teaching quality. The imbalance between social demand and talent supply darkens the student employment environment. It will certainly shake the confidence and the need for further study of potential art students. The sustainable development of art education does not go well.

2.2 Broad Specialty Orientation in Colleges and Universities Subjectively Slack the Characteristic of Elite Education for Art Specialties

The art education aims to cultivate artistic talents who can create spiritual civilization and advanced culture.

It distinguishes art education from other disciplines and specialties and gives it the characteristic of greater independence. Influenced by the ideas of mass higher education, the art specialties are given broader orientation by colleges and universities and even the society. Consequentially, the integral structure of talent training mode is changed and there is misunderstanding of many schooling concepts, which are:

2.2.1 Enrollment According to the General Discipline

On the basis of classification of the catalogue of specialty, colleges and universities choose art students by unified entrance examination, skill test with same topic and unified conditions of admission. The implementation of this program obscures the boundaries of art specialties and reduces the features of various orientations. For example, the orientations such as Chinese painting, oil painting and engraving were independent undergraduate programs before the State Education Commission adjusted the specialty structure of art in 1998. From the existing catalogue of specialty, they are the orientations under painting. However, in terms of the features and character of specialty, they have totally different features and requirements for artistic talent cultivation. Besides, they have different emphasis on the artistic accomplishment of students. In the face of the increasing number of applications, colleges and universities enroll students simply in a uniform way. Firstly, it fades out the difference of various specialties; secondly, that the students are tested on their skills with the same topic causes the decline of the quality of students; additionally, unified conditions of admission are bound to cover up the students with special artistic talent.

2.2.2 The Establishment of the Talent Training Mode—"Wide Caliber and Profound Foundation"

It is the requirements for talent cultivation for higher education and teaching proposed on the basis of the reform of the credit system. With regard to the talent cultivation in colleges and universities, it plays an active role in facilitate the transition from traditional academic year system to the credit system. On the basis of liberal education, to determine the orientation by selecting the subjects is a kind of training mode with high flexibility which students can select their orientation and what they want to learn. The author suggests that as for art discipline, this mode should not be applied universally. The establishment of the platform for liberal education for different art specialties and orientations is not operable at all. The continuity of skill learning is one of important features of art education. The disciplinary knowledge of students is certainly important, but the cultivation of specialty accomplishment is the focus of artistic talent training. Profound foundation means profound basic specialized knowledge and skills within the cultivation framework for art specialties; wide caliber means the radiation-type learning which bases on the acquisition of

specialized knowledge and focuses on the improvement of specialty accomplishment.

2.2.3 The Requirement of the Objective of Applied Talent Training

The objective of talent training proposed by many colleges and universities is to cultivate practical and applied talents for the development of social economy. Although this objective corresponds to the requirements of mass higher education, it reduces the quality of talent training subjectively and makes the orientation and development of some disciplines and specialties deviate from its original features and functions. The art includes some specialties of high applicability such as artistic designing, art education and musical performance and also some specialties of so-called pure art such as fine arts and painting. These two types of art specialties have greatly different objectives of talent training. On the whole, both of them aim to cultivate the talents who have high artistic creation ability, high academic research ability and all-sided comprehensive quality. While strengthening the social function of art specialties, too much emphasis on training the abilities of talents for practice and application is bound to reduce its perceptual quality and the main function of creativity training. For this reason, the objective of talent training for higher art education is approximately degraded to that for some higher vocational schools, junior colleges and vocational schools. It results in the fault of artistic talent training. The ambiguity of training levels worsens the difficulty of employment encountered by the students majoring in art specialties.

2.3 Teaching Evaluation Based on the Unified Standard for All Disciplines and Specialties Makes the Art Education Transform From Elite Education to Mass Education

During the period of "11th five-year plan", "the three big tasks" of Chinese education are popularization, development and improvement. With regard to higher education, to improve the education quality and schooling level is the main mission of next phase. The five-year evaluation system was established in 2003 in order to quickly solve the problems that the quantity and quality of talents cannot adequately meet the requirements of economic and social development, the education and teaching reform is in urgent need of further development and the investment in education and teaching is insufficient. The teaching evaluation center for higher education was founded at the same time. It represented that the teaching evaluation became institutionalized, specialized and scientific. As the "booster" for the construction, reform and development of schools, the teaching evaluation was an effective means of improving the education and teaching quality of higher education in certain historical period. At macro level, the teaching evaluation plays an important part in clarifying the schooling ideas of colleges and universities, highlighting

the central position of teaching activities, increasing the investment in teaching, improving the schooling conditions, strengthening the school management, upgrading the educational and teaching ideas, strengthening teaching management and optimizing the specialty structure. However, as for the art specialties, the teaching evaluation does not produce any visible effect and great significance.

For the implementation of teaching evaluation, colleges and universities consider the evaluation indicator system as the basic standard of teaching and overlook the fact the teaching evaluation indicator system is a indicator system made under the same standard and suitable for evaluating the teaching quality of multiple disciplines and specialties. Basically, the teaching evaluation is the overall evaluation on the schooling level and teaching quality of colleges and universities instead of the special evaluation on some discipline or specialty. However, the indicators and observation points of the evaluation indicator system are deemed as the rigid index for each discipline and specialty of colleges and universities to show its schooling level and teaching quality. Art specialties cannot compete with other disciplines in the aspects of schooling level and conditions, level of scientific research, employment rate, qualifications of teaching staff, professional titles and other evaluation indicators. In addition to the factors including self-construction and self-development, in the evaluation indicator system, the special standard for art discipline is replaced by the general standard for arts, science and engineering. This system attaches too much importance to the quantitative level rather the qualitative level and does not adequately respect and follow the features of art and the law of development. This is one of the main reasons for the transformation of art education from elite to mass.

3. EXISTING PROBLEMS OF ART EDUCATION AND TEACHING IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION

A. The contradiction between the lag of discipline construction and the interdisciplinary standards for evaluation indicators makes the art specialties of colleges and universities stay close to the evaluation indicators and deviate from the law of teaching and the training orientation in art education.

B. Too much emphasis on the employment rate makes many colleges and universities passively adjust the structure of art specialties and increase the specialties of high applicability and employment rate to meet the evaluation requirements. It leads to the decrease of the number of artistic talents.

C. Full-time teachers are required to have higher qualifications. For this reason, many excellent artists with low educational background and professional title are

refused. For the art specialties of colleges and universities, it is the policy obstacle for organizing the team of teaching staff dedicated to theoretical research and artistic practice.

D. The identification of scientific achievements made by full-time teachers attaches too much importance to research approval, academic works, thesis research and other theoretical research findings. Consequentially, the teachers engaged in teaching art creation pay more attention to the above issues. The decline of the guidance level for art creation directly causes the decline of teaching quality.

E. There is sharp contrast between total investment in teaching, the calculation method for the mean cost of student training and the far insufficient substantial investment in the teaching of art specialties. The imbalance between the macroscopic sufficiency and the actual investment in different specialties and disciplines cannot ensure their synchronous and harmonious development to a great extent.

CONCLUSION

In the development phase of mass higher education, the art education of colleges and universities shall adequately respect the features of art and various orientation as well as the law of development and further specify the functions and responsibilities of art education for colleges and universities according to the requirements of the law of art education and teaching and the needs of economic and cultural construction. By accurate positioning, proper construction and rapid development, the system for teaching quality evaluation applicable to art specialties shall be established as quickly as possible. The art education shall go back to the talent training mode which is the artistic elite education and establish the platform for training senior talents and promoting the prosperity of socialist culture.

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