



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Understanding How College Students Describe Art: An Analysis on Art Education in China¹

Hong Wang²

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how Chinese college students appreciate art as reflected in their descriptions of an artwork. Students' descriptions were defined by a content analysis with respect to opinions and facts, art elements and principles. A questionnaire was also used to investigate students' attitudes toward art education. 85 students who were divided into four groups participated in the study. The results showed: (1) participants were more familiar with art appreciation than art elements and principles; (2) there was a slight but no significant difference between students' describing facts and opinions; (3) participants had significantly higher scores on describing art elements than describing art principles; (4) among all participants with regard to all elements and principles, there was a significant difference of describing space between students of art education and students of music education, and also, there was a significant difference of describing value between Chinese language students and other students. The results suggested that participants, including those of art education, had poor knowledge and strategies of understanding art, implying art education in China may have ended up with failure.

Key words: Art appreciation, art description, art education, art elements and principles.

Available Online: 13th May, 2015.

This is an open access article under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License, 2015.

¹ The study is funded by Chongqing Higher Education Association.

² Faculty of Education, Southwest University, China. Email: 57179149@qq.com.

1.0 Introduction

The validity of art education and aesthetic education, as an important part of all-around education, has been acknowledged in decades' laws and government policies in China since 1949. Recently it has been reiterated that the goal of education is to “train participants of and successors to the socialist cause who develop morally, intellectually, physically and aesthetically” (Hu, 2012). The government also issued series of laws stressing the importance of art education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2002, 2006; The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2010). These provide for art education being a compulsory course with full-time teachers, which is also expected to be incorporated in art education curriculum throughout the country. In reality, it seems that art education has not been treated as so important as it has been emphasized in those laws and policies. According to Guo (2007), though more and more schools become enthusiastic about art education by encouraging students to receive art skill training programs to pass college art entrance examination or to participate in art competition to win honor for the school, art education in most schools is neglected comparing with other core subjects. Zhong (2013) listed five problems of art education in China: misconception of value of art education, negative influence by the examination-oriented education system, irrelevance of art education to family and community, students' lack of interest in art and shortage of art teachers. Art education seems to exist in name only.

Overall, there are two major problems against the development of art education. One is the double difficulty of shortage of art teachers and job-hopping, which is most likely to happen in some western rural, less developed regions. According to a study in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (Kong & Dong, 2000), the average number of art teachers in 2274 schools surveyed was 1.7, and there was only one full-time teacher in every five schools. Most of art teachers were non-professional and part-time teachers. Not only is the number of art teachers small, but it is unstable. It's not unusual for young art teachers to quit their jobs because of low salary and little respect. The other problem is the examination-oriented education system. In Chinese schools, subjects are classified into two groups: Major Subjects and Minor Subjects. Major Subjects are those subjects that are required by the College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) while Minor Subjects are not, to which art course belongs. Being excluded from the big examination, art teachers can't deal with their work unrecognized. However, they finally find their positions in another examination-oriented system—a path that also leads students to college that is different from but parallel to Gaokao. As most students who are fairly good at regular subjects often choose to go to college through Gaokao, some underachieving students have to find another way out to fulfill the goal of receiving higher education. Most of them would choose to learn art, music or athletic sport depending on their backgrounds. This makes art teachers and art students have something in common: going to Art College through art examination. Though these students are still required to participate in Gaokao, their fates are no longer determined by scores of Gaokao. Instead, whether or not art students have received systematic art skill training becomes the decisive factor in the competition of going to Art College. And obviously art teachers can play a practical role in teaching those students art skills. But this only happens after school because not all the students want to learn art skill to become art students and prescribed art textbooks don't focus on art skills. In addition to that, art teachers are not prepared to teach students who are not interested in strict art skill training.

These have caused negative consequences of neglecting art education in class. A typical symptom of devaluing the importance of art education is that scheduled art education classes are often taken over by regular subject teachers. Moreover, in art education class, art teachers intend to acquiesce in students' finishing incomplete homework and other regular classroom assignments. Under such circumstances, regular students would probably learn neither art knowledge nor art skills. And art students would probably understand art better than regular students, but not much, because it is skills that they put a special emphasis on and are going to be tested on, not art appreciation.

Many researchers have realized that these problems may affect art education in college. However, they either tried to address problems of art education at college level in isolation, separating them from

elementary and secondary education (Ning, 2011); or completely neglected individual experience and practice (Zhang, 2012); or only focused on philosophical aesthetics (Li, 2012). Few of them were concerned with students' feelings. In addition, most of their studies were not based on empirical research but just theoretical inquiry, thus failing to identify the real problem of art education. To clarify the misconceptions on art education and conduct an empirical study on how college students understand art, this study puts forward a hypothesis that having been received years of so-called art education in elementary and middle schools, college students may still show some inadequacies of understanding art in regard of describing art.

1.01 Purposes and research questions

This study's purpose was to explore how college students understand art as reflected in their descriptions of an artwork. From students' written information I decided that there was a reasonable expectation of being able to address and answer four questions: (1) How will college students evaluate their understanding of art appreciation? (2) To what extent have opinions and facts been represented in college students' descriptions of an artwork? (3) To what extent have art elements and principles been represented in college students' descriptions of an artwork? (4) Are there any differences between students of different backgrounds?

By analyzing college students' written descriptions, I hoped to discover neglected areas in the practice of art education in China, to offer comments and consider implications for future art education reform.

2.0 Methods

Content analysis was utilized to investigate students' descriptions of an artwork. To measure students' descriptions, first, I defined the content to be examined and articulated the research questions. Second, I developed categories relating to the questions. There were three categories: types of description, art elements and art principles. Types of description were further classified into subjective and objective, namely, description of opinions and description of facts. Categories of art elements and principles vary a little according to different theories. The category of art elements and principles used in the study was based on a typical one categorized by Hobbs and Salome (1991), which includes line, color, shape, value, space, texture, unity, variety, focus and balance. Then, students' mentioning in their writing in terms of the three categories was analyzed and converted into frequencies (scores) and recorded. A questionnaire was also designed to explore students' self-evaluation of art knowledge.

College students who enrolled in my course of Aesthetic Education were recruited to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. The final sample comprised 85 individuals (15 male students, 70 female students) between 18 and 25 years of age. Among them there were 7 art education majors, 14 music education majors, 36 Chinese language majors and 28 other majors. Participants were first instructed to complete the questionnaire and then observe and write a description about the painting *The Last Supper* by Dirk Bouts within 20 minutes with no less than 100 Chinese characters. The image of the artwork was sent to participants' cellphones as well as to a big screen in front of the lab classroom through a projector.

3.0 Results

3.01 Participants' attitudes towards art knowledge

Participants were asked four questions to rate how much they knew art elements, art principles, art appreciation and aesthetic education. The results showed there was a significant difference between participants' rating in regard of each art variable (Table 1). Over half of the participants (57.7%) reported that they knew very well or knew a little about art appreciation. But only 27.1 percent, 22.4 percent and 16.5 percent of the participants reported they knew a little about art elements, art principles and

aesthetic education respectively. The results suggested that participants thought they knew art appreciation better than the other three. It appeared that participants didn't associate art appreciation with art elements and principles. In other words, participants' conception of art appreciation may not be based on "understanding" of art.

Table1. Frequency and percentage of participants' self-evaluation of art knowledge

	Know very well		Know a little		Know poorly		Know very poorly		X ²
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
Art elements	0	0%	23	27.1%	52	61.2%	10	11.8%	32.635*
Art principles	0	0%	19	22.4%	54	63.5%	12	14.1%	35.741*
Art appreciation	2	2.4%	47	55.3%	33	38.8%	3	3.5%	70.811*
Aesthetic education	0	0%	14	16.5%	62	72.9%	9	10.6%	60.447*

Note: * $p < 0.0001$

An independent samples Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to examine the relation between majors and participants' self-evaluation of art knowledge. The relation between variable of major and that of knowing art elements was statistically significant, $X^2(3, N = 85) = 17.576, p < 0.05$. Pairwise comparisons showed there was a significant difference between participants of art and music education and those of other majors. The relation between majors and knowing art principles was slightly statistically significant but there was no significant difference between groups of major upon pairwise comparisons, $X^2(3, N = 85) = 8.265, p < 0.05$. Also, the relation between variable of major and that of knowing art appreciation was statistically significant, $X^2(3, N = 85) = 14.676, p < 0.05$. Pairwise comparisons showed there was a significant difference between majors of art and music education and those of Chinese language. And finally, the relation between majors and knowing aesthetic education was statistically significant, too, $X^2(3, N = 85) = 14.638, p < 0.05$. Pairwise comparisons showed there was a significant difference between participants of art education and those of Chinese language and other majors. The results suggested that majors of art education and music education were more likely to report they know how to appreciate art while other majors were less likely to do that.

3.02 Participants' descriptions of the artwork

Averagely, participants had a slightly higher score on describing facts than describing opinions but there was no significant difference between them (Table2). The analysis of variances showed that the effect of groups of major (art education, music education, Chinese language, others) didn't significantly influence participants' descriptions of opinions or facts, $F(3, 81) = 1.042, p = 0.378; F(3, 81) = 0.782, p = 0.508$.

Table 2. Independent-samples t-test for participants' descriptions of opinions and facts

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
opinions	0	18.00	5.176	2.677	-0.683	0.496
facts	0	16.00	5.541	3.076		

With regard to elements and principles, the mean of describing elements was higher than that of describing principles. Paired-samples t-test showed that participants had significantly higher scores on describing art elements than describing art principles, $t = 7.400, p < 0.0001$. Participants scored highest on describing color in terms of elements and scored highest on focus in terms of principles. They scored lowest on describing line and unity regarding to elements and principles respectively (Table 3). These results suggested that participants were more likely to describe artworks with respect to art elements, especially color, and less likely to do that with respect to art principles, especially unity.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for participants' descriptions of elements and principles

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
ELEMENTS	0	7	2.141	1.878	7.400*
PRINCIPLES	0	6	0.694	1.112	
Line (element)	0	1	0.035	0.185	
Shape (element)	0	3	0.423	0.713	
Value (element)	0	2	0.235	0.479	
Color (element)	0	6	1.152	1.295	
Space (element)	0	2	0.294	0.530	
Unity (principle)	0	1	0.035	0.185	
Variety (principle)	0	1	0.082	0.276	
Focus (principle)	0	3	0.364	0.594	
Balance (principle)	0	6	0.211	0.725	

Note: * $p < 0.0001$

An independent samples Kruskal-Wallis test examined the relationship between majors and descriptions of elements and principles. The relationship between majors and description of space was statistically significant, $X^2(3, N = 85) = 8.794, p < 0.05$. Pairwise comparisons showed there was a significant difference between participants of art education and those of music education, $X^2 = -25.000, p < 0.05$. The results indicated participants of art education were more likely to know how to describe an artwork with respect to space and participants of music education were less likely to know how to do so. The relationship between majors and description of value was also statistically significant, $X^2(3, N = 85) = 11.945, p < 0.01$. Pairwise comparisons showed there was only a significant difference between participants of Chinese language and those of other majors, $X^2 = -12.601, p < 0.05$. The results suggested that majors of Chinese language were more likely to know how to describe an artwork with respect to value and participants of other majors were less likely to know how to do the same thing.

4.0 Discussion

It is not surprising that more students reported that they knew art appreciation better than aesthetic education. This is especially true for students who misunderstand the relationship between the two. Art appreciation is a usual expression frequently used in people's daily lives while aesthetic education is an uncommon term that can only be found in scholarly books. This makes people "know" the word art very well but they may have no idea of what aesthetic means to them. A number of them even mistake aesthetic education for cosmetic surgery or hairdressing. On the other hand, students' understanding of art appreciation may not be on the basis of art education because art appreciation not only refers to appreciation of visual arts but also the appreciation that includes all aspects of arts, literature, operas, music, as well as visual arts. In some cases, art appreciation is used as a synonym for literature appreciation in Chinese language teaching. As Chinese language is a compulsory subject at all school levels, students probably learn more about art appreciation from language course than from art course. The finding that students were less confident about reporting they knew art elements and principles than reporting art appreciation indicate that they didn't correlate their understandings of art appreciation with art elements and principles and aesthetic education. This can be explained by the absence from art course, but the prescribed art textbooks may be partly to blame for it. Most Chinese schools adopt art textbooks recommended by the Ministry of Education. The contents of these art textbooks are mainly based on art history, introductions of types of arts and well-known masterpieces. Art elements and principles are seldom or never discussed. A typical example is *Arts Appreciation (Visual Art)*, the textbook of compulsory course for junior high school edited by Department of Fine Arts of People's Education Press (2003) and examined by the Committee of National Elementary and Secondary School Textbook Examination. The textbook has two parts. One deals with Chinese visual art, the other foreign art. Little about art elements and principles is mentioned in either part. By reading the book, one can learn no more than stories and background information about each work of art listed in it.

The findings of the study also suggest that students, including those of art education majors, thought describing opinions and facts were of equal importance, thus confusing these two. Much of their

describing opinions would be either emotional or associative, for instance, “This part of the painting is pretty nice”, or “I think the artist painted colors very well,” or “This group of people must be discussing an important religious issue”, or “Those who stand behind the person in the middle probably are his servants”. Such statements may be true for students themselves but not for others, hence art beginners should avoid describing opinions. Attaching importance to describing facts doesn’t mean personal opinions aren’t necessary; on the contrary, any art appreciation will end up with an evaluation. But the point is, we need to get familiar with the strategy of gathering facts about a work of art before drawing conclusions. As [Hobbs and Salome \(1991\)](#) pointed out, an appropriate and critical method of thinking and talking about art should contain four stages: description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation, and looking at an artwork and describing the facts about it is the first step towards understanding art. Additionally, only describing people, objects and other facts in a work of art isn’t adequate to ensure the appropriate way of understanding art. When students could hardly realize the importance of identifying and recording concrete facts, neither could they associate facts with art elements and principles. They left over some essential factors by which art appreciation differs from ordinary appreciation. For this very reason, students revealed the problem of lack of basic knowledge and strategy to understand art.

The work of art used for testing students’ ability to describe it contains almost all the information that relates to art elements and principles. Some are even very noticeable. The artwork is a regularly symmetrical balance design that allows viewers to easily identify objective things as well as line, color, value, shape and space. Quite normally, among all the students, 92.9 percent of music education majors and 85.7 percent of art education majors reported they knew art appreciation, and only 44.4 percent of Chinese language majors and half of other majors did so. But this may not be true. Students of art education and music education may overestimate their understandings of art appreciation because students of art education only did better than students of music education in describing space with regard to all elements and principles, and students of music education didn’t have any advantages over others at all. This demonstrates that, on the one hand, art education students only had a slight advantage of identifying space over music students; on the other hand, art students’ descriptions hardly sorted with what they had learned. Overall, there is no significant difference between descriptions of art education students’ and those of other students’. Considering the excessive interest in learning skills, one plausible explanation is that art education students, the same with other students, neither have a desire nor have been instructed to learn how to describe a work of art with regard to art elements and principles. As for music education students, it seems they didn’t know art appreciation as much as they had predicted, especially when it comes to description of space. This is probably because of the different representations of symbol-learning between art students and music students. Music students are not trained to be sensitive to visual compositions; instead, they are trained to develop musical representations that represent musical properties as musical units but not in terms of visual or verbal features ([Gordon, 1980](#)). Unlike some other art elements and principles that can be converted to understanding and explaining music, space is a unique characteristic of visual art closely related to linear perspective, which is the very element that requires time and effort to comprehend. So, music students’ unconsciously neglect and refusal of it just prove that they haven’t learned how to appreciate art that way.

Another surprising finding is that students of Chinese language did better than other students with exception of art and music education students in terms of description of value. Students of Chinese language contributed to 66.7 percent of the responses of describing value while students of art education wrote nothing about it at all. The reason why this group of students noticed value in particular may be that language students are very familiar with metaphors, one of the typical rhetoric techniques that describe something by referring to something else. And value is very effective for establishing mood that can be easily reinforced by metaphors. Students of language were supposed to read a lot of poems and novels based on imaginations. They could effectively associate one thing with another in situations similar to reading or writing. When appreciating art, they were more likely to associate, for example, light with good, and dark with evil. Even if clues of value in a work of art may not be noticeable for others, they would still identify and describe them with associations. This is why

most of emotional and associative opinions came from students of language.

5.0 Conclusion and implications

The study shows students had poor knowledge and strategy of appreciating artworks with respect to describing facts and art elements and principles despite the fact that some groups did better than others. But, differences in descriptions between groups were largely attributed to the examination-oriented education system, not art education. This strongly suggests that, to some extent, art education policies in China have turned out to be a failure. Numerous facts show that many young people aren't interested in art. They hardly go to art galleries or museums in their spare time, let alone comment or study it. This is not because they don't really like art but because they don't know how to like it. If the examination-oriented system doesn't change and art course in schools continues to be replaced by other subjects, students will never have the chance to understand art. And, if art education only focuses on skill training, students will not learn how to understand art, neither. Understanding art is a seeing, describing, analyzing and interpretation process that is beneficial to stimulate students' imagination and creativity. Without these mental and physical activities, the goal of art education would not be fulfilled. Under the circumstance of the present educational system, teaching students basic art language and art appreciation strategy may be the first step towards a more effective and more feasible art education.

As the examination-oriented system has had a negative effect upon art education policies and practices for a long time, art teachers may unconsciously take it for granted that art education is not that important. As a result, art teachers may become unenthusiastic about teaching in class. Some studies show teachers' beliefs and attitudes about the nature and content of a specific subject are likely to influence their decisions of practice (Pajares, 1992) and the individual teacher's values and beliefs determine the way how art is taught (Gray & MacGregor, 1991). Another study especially emphasizes the importance of attending to art teachers' beliefs of art education in terms of subject matter, indicating art teachers' attitudes of the contents of art education strongly affect what they learned and what and how they will teach. (Grauer, 1998). This is especially true in the area of art education because unlike other subjects that are motivated by prescribed textbooks and government exams, art teachers are allowed to make their own decisions about the content and evaluation of art, and their beliefs of art education undoubtedly have played a critical role in affecting the development of art education. Unfortunately, present teacher education in art doesn't attach much importance to art teachers' attitudes toward art education as to training specific skills and knowledge. And it turns out that those candidates of art teachers participated in the study did emphasize art skills over understanding art. This implies there is an urgent need for reform of art teacher education program, focusing on beliefs and discipline-based pedagogy rather than ideas of fostering utilitarian craftsmen.

References

- Department of Fine Arts of People's Education Press. (2003). *Arts Appreciation (Visual Art)*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- Gordon, E. E. (1980). *Learning sequences in music*. Chicago: GIA.
- Grauer, K. (1998). Beliefs of pre-service teachers toward art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 39(4), 360-370.
- Guo, X. (2007). A Survey and analysis of art education in elementary and high schools in China. *Art Education*, 6, 4-5.
- Gray, J., & MacGregor, R. N. (1991). Studies of art teaching: Simple facts about complex activities. *Journal of Art & Design Education*, 10 (3), 281-291.
- Hobbs, J., & Salome, R. (1991). *The visual experience*. Worcester, Massachusetts: Davis Publication, Inc.
- Hu, J. (2012, November 17). Hu Jintao's report at 18th Party Congress. Retrieved from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.html.

- Kong, Z., Dong, H. (2000). Problems and solutions of art education in primary and secondary schools in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. *Education in Ningxia*, 1, 16-18.
- Li, X. (2012). Major achievements and the path of aesthetic education in modern China. *Journal of Henan Institute of Education*, 31(2), 2012, 76-82.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2006, June 29). Compulsory Education Law. Retrieved from: http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_619/200606/15687.html
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2002, May 13). National Development Program for Art Education (2001-2010). Retrieved from: http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_795/201001/80694.html.
- Ning, W. (2011). Present situation and a perspective of research on aesthetic education in college. *Journal of Tianjin University (Social Sciences)*, 13 (16), 537-541.
- Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teacher beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 307-332.
- The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. (2010, July 29). China's Medium and Long Term Education Reform and Development Plan. Retrieved from: http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-07/29/content_1667143.html.
- Zhang, D. (2012). A review of research on aesthetic education in college over ten years. *Modern Education Science*, 1, 2012, 32-34.
- Zhong, X., Yu, Y., Cui, Y., & Ren, Y. (2013). A return to art education: The problems and implications of art education in compulsory education. *Theoretical Research*, 7, 186-189.