



# Tensions in aesthetic socialization: Negotiating competence and differentiation in Chinese art test prep schools

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how art students negotiate tensions that arise during aesthetic socialization. Drawing on ethnographic data and thirty in-depth interviews with art students and teachers preparing for the art test in China, I show the micro-processes of how students strike a balance between institutional imperatives toward competence and differentiation. I perform the analysis of such a negotiation in three areas of tension: (1) learning and unlearning, (2) present demands and long-term goals, and (3) the contrasting identities of artist and designer. First, students achieve an active control of shifting between demonstrating technical competence and deskilling, through engaging in a processual practice of learning to unlearn. In doing so, students manage to convey a natural ease in their work, enabling an ability to improvise and deliver their artistic visions within conventions. Second, students reconcile their present demand of university admissions and long-term goal of occupational socialization, by emphasizing moral values shared in both test preparation and creative work. Finally, students navigate artistic identities by weighing the contrasting images of Western artists and Chinese artists socialized within prep schools. Most students' aspirations to be designers, rather than fine artists, are paradoxically connected to their pursuit of aesthetic qualities central to idealized Western artists. As art learning has become increasingly standardized and institutionalized, analyzing tensions in aesthetic socialization is essential for examining the ongoing processes of negotiating conflicts within artistic production and creative work generally.

## 1. Introduction

*"I wonder if van Gogh could pass the art test if he was born in China."*

– Seventeen-year-old art test taker

Ever since the Romantic era, artistic practices have been associated with free imagination, self-expression, and creativity. Standardizing the ways in which art is taught and learned thus appears to be a contradiction in terms (Elkins, 2001). The past few decades, however, have witnessed the "academization" of the arts in higher education, and, consequently, young artists in the making have gradually shifted their artistic concerns from expressiveness and creativity to virtuosity and theory (Adler, 1979; Chumley, 2016; Fine, 2018). In academic art, at the extreme, as Becker (1982: 290) illustrates, "there is the right way to do everything: to draw a tree, to harmonize a theme, to portray Lear." Art learning has been increasingly standardized, institutionalized, and even quantitatively measured (Elkins, 2009; Wilf, 2014a). Embedded in multiple evaluative systems, aspiring artists are expected to both demonstrate their competence by mastering institutional standards and show their creative inclinations by practicing differentiation (Nylander, 2014). A pressing question, then, is how art students learn to balance competing imperatives toward conformity and differentiation in practice.

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The ongoing negotiation between conformity and differentiation characterizes contemporary artistic practices and cultural production, constituting a core debate on the duality of constraint and creativity rooted in central theories in the sociology of culture. Scholars have argued that the creative process is both facilitated and constrained by systems of production (Peterson & Anand, 2004), the conventions of art worlds (Becker, 1982), the social positions of artists in fields (Bourdieu, 1996), and the uncertainty intrinsic to the nature of creative work (Menger, 2014). As a result, artists and creative workers are involved in striking a balance between conforming to institutional rules and simultaneously differentiating from them. A line of ethnographic studies has investigated this dynamic negotiation in situ in various creative domains, including the culinary world (Fine, 1992), film scoring (Faulkner, 1983), improvised performance of jazz (Faulkner & Becker, 2009), contemporary art (Gerber, 2017; Wohl, 2019), fashion (Mears, 2011), jazz education (Nylander, 2014; Wilf, 2014a), amongst others. In particular, I draw on Vanina Leschziner's (2015) analysis of elite chefs making choices between traditional cuisines and originality. While traditional cuisines prioritize conforming to accepted standards regarding flavor, originality demands the imperative of differentiation. By staying within the bounds of convention and demonstrating originality, chefs strike a balance between practical imperatives toward conformity and differentiation, thus achieving "creativity within constraints." I adopt Leschziner's concepts to examine how artists negotiate institutional imperatives toward *competence* and *differentiation*. For the purposes of this analysis, I use the term of competence, rather than conformity, to emphasize the evaluative systems imposed on students in early selection processes. Competence involves conformity. To be judged competent, students must conform to the standards of evaluators. By over-conforming, however, they risk being perceived as lacking in authenticity. Thus, the process of balancing competence with differentiation demonstrates how creative workers negotiate their "zone of discretion" (Fine, 1992).

This article examines creative tensions in the context of aesthetic socialization. Becoming an artist is a social process. Novice students are socialized into an art world through learning the specific rules, skills, and meanings of that domain. Aesthetic socialization takes place tacitly, shaping how students perceive and navigate rigid conventions that permeate learning and creative processes. Students learn to respond to institutional imperatives in the process of practicing art and constructing selves. Studying the creative process is challenging, since artists rarely verbalize their aesthetic decisions in explicit terms (Koppman, 2014). Rule-governed academic art programs, with overt aesthetic standards and value judgments, are an ideal setting for observing how students navigate institutional imperatives. Extending this literature to a non-Western culture, I examine the case of Chinese teenage students in art test prep schools, who embody "the return of the creative impulses (and practices) that Maoists once sought to destroy" (Chumley, 2016: 1). In China, policymakers and educators see creativity as a valuable form of human capital in the new economy, and they believe teaching creativity in educational systems on a mass scale will help generate new occupational groups that lead to a "creative class" (Florida, 2002). Artistic production is inherently shaped by standardized educational systems, which entail large-scale artistic training, selection, and evaluation. Thus, the Chinese case both presents an alternative to Western notions of creativity and serves as an extreme case to reveal more generic processes of aesthetic socialization (Buchholz, 2018).

Unlike the portfolio-based admission process of U.S. art institutes, every year, over half a million Chinese students take standardized tests to continue their art training in college. For-profit art test prep schools have thus emerged to offer intense training programs that teach rigid techniques of realist drawing and general art history. In these prep schools, art students formally develop their initial artistic knowledge and skills and construct occupational identities. Thus, how do art test prep schools teach creativity while China's educational system, by design, rewards conformity? Chumley (2016) offers a nuanced analysis of how standardized art practices emerged from the interplay between institutions that administered art tests and the art test prep industry. In art test fever, Chumley (2016 : 63) argues, "realist drawing ceased to be artistic practice." After students entered university-level art programs, they were taught to practice creativity and "find themselves" to locate an aesthetic subjectivity (Chumley, 2016). I complement Chumley's study by picking up where she left off. Prestigious art institutes initiated a profound reform of art tests in 2015, following criticism that the art test prep industry had significantly reduced students' creativity and individuality. Art institutes adjusted by adding design to the list of test subjects and prioritized individual expression.<sup>1</sup> This reform forced prep schools to add design to their technique-oriented curriculum and teach students to demonstrate differentiation. Such a shift echoes the findings in studies of tight coupling on how changing rules bring about changing practices (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Lom, 2015). This change requires students not only to be judged competent according to technical standards, but also to differentiate from convention to be recognized as creative.

This article examines the micro-processes by which students learn to balance institutional imperatives regarding competence and differentiation. I argue that Chinese art students are involved in resolving three areas of tension in aesthetic socialization: learning and unlearning, present demands and long-term goals, and the contrasting identities of artist and designer. Although I treat these areas of tension as analytically separate, they are often empirically intertwined. While the Chinese case has certain particularities, these tensions I identify are inherent to aesthetic socialization in academic art, and they comprise the sites where art students navigate competence and differentiation.

<sup>1</sup> The 2015 art test organized by the China Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) required students to, first, complete a drawing of a provided lollipop, and second, create a design work based on the "feelings of flavor" after eating the lollipop. In addition to capturing such "feelings," the design test was further complicated by requiring students to incorporate the lollipop's listed ingredients and chemical compounds in their submissions. In 2017, CAFA required candidates to draw a painting based on the lyrics of Bob Dylan's *Blowing in the Wind* and then to design a certificate for his 2016 Nobel Prize of Literature.

## 2. Dimensions of aesthetic socialization

Regarding art learning in institutional settings, I select *aesthetic*, a “slippery” term (Fine, 1992: 1269), to capture a wide range of qualitative experiences of materials and forms in art school educations in the “aestheticization” of the world (Chumley, 2016: 11).<sup>2</sup> Sociologists of culture have suggested we approach aesthetics as an activity, rather than a body of doctrine. That is, participants of art worlds make aesthetic judgments frequently and, in this process, develop an often unformalized aesthetic, constituting a specialized form of conventions that guides working participants and regularizes practice and patterns of cooperation (Becker, 1982). Further, as a product of social location, aesthetic judgment can, in turn, shape interaction by enabling group formation and maintenance (Wohl, 2015). A sociological approach to aesthetics thus links the aesthetic and the social, departing from the Kantian claims of a pure aesthetic.<sup>3</sup>

Building off this literature and with a narrower focus on art learning, this article further conceptualizes the relationship between sociability and aesthetics by investigating what I call *aesthetic socialization* – the process by which individuals are socialized into multiple institutions that constitute the art world and learn to respond to its aesthetic evaluation, through which they develop an artistic self and perform a public presentation of that self. This definition emphasizes three critical aspects of art learning in institutional settings: the acquiring of artistic skills and knowledge, the development of one’s understanding of and response to institutional judgments, and the development of an artistic identity and its social persona. The examination of aesthetic socialization steers our attention towards a range of aesthetic domains in which art students learn the technical, occupational, and even moral characters of artistic practices.

First, aesthetic socialization involves the experiences of learning craft skill and artistic knowledge to induce creativity. To be judged competent by insiders and to become a legitimate artist, techniques must be mastered as tools to realize artistic vision (Fine, 2018). Examples range from learning jazz (Wilf, 2014a) to the magician’s craft (Jones, 2011) to glassblowing (O’Connor, 2005). Standardized techniques are what Paul Klee calls “the contents of the paintbox” to which an artist adapts oneself (Klee, 1968). Once mastered, the paintbox provides artists with what they can work with and what they can work against, constituting “constraints for creativity” (Stokes, 2005). Additionally, art students are involved in occupational socialization in the art school. While engaged in routinized behavior of learning skills, art students also inhabit the social and cultural norms of the art world, as well as career skills for the transition to the creative labor market to which they aspire (Bourdieu, 1996; Elkins, 2009; Menger, 2001). Students learn to make sense of their occupational roles: what they can do after graduation, what it means to be a designer or a fine artist regarding lifestyle and financial viability, and how they should interact with curators and collectors to excel in the art world. This socialization process necessarily involves acquiring an artistic identity, the central outcome of the art school, which is achieved primarily by navigating competing evaluative systems and responding to aesthetic judgments (Fine, 2017). Developing an artistic self is also central to institutional settings with rigid rules in authoritarian societies. As Chumley (2016) shows, Chinese art students are involved in projects of aesthetic “self-styling,” and constantly make and remake their styles to identify selves and seek distinctiveness.

A lesser-discussed domain of aesthetic socialization is the moral dimension of artistic practices. As Becker (1982: 305) suggests, “Since people experience their aesthetic beliefs as natural, proper, and moral, an attack on a convention and its aesthetic also attacks a morality.” The intertwining relationship between aesthetics and morality is shown in Wohl’s (2015) analysis of the “community sense” of an erotic arts club. Relying on the cohesive power of aesthetic judgments, group members generate shared moral meaning to form a moral community, through which they draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and outsiders (Wohl, 2015). Aesthetic experiences, such as consuming “authentic” outsider art (Hahl, Zuckerman & Kim, 2017) or censoring pornographic art (Beisel, 1993), are intrinsically related to moral hierarchy, class domination, and cultural distinction (Lamont, 1992, 2000). In institutional settings, art students can be socialized to the moral character of artistic practices; for instance, in Chinese art test prep schools, students who draw quietly are seen as “diligent,” while those talking all the time are seen as “lazy” (Chumley, 2016). I further explore the moral dimension of art, arguing that morality can be employed by teachers and students to facilitate art learning. Taken together, aesthetic socialization foregrounds the roles of sociability and interactions in artistic development, emphasizing how peer collaboration, group culture, participatory pedagogy, and organizations and institutions to which they are embedded shape individual creativity (Accominotti, 2009; Corte, Parker & Fine, 2019; Wilf, 2014b).

## 3. Tensions in artistic practices

Practicing creativity is a complex, nonlinear process that requires constant decision making and negotiations between opposing forces (Cronin & Loewenstein, 2018). This feature is determined by the inevitable external constraints imposed on creative workers

<sup>2</sup> For Dewey (1934: 46–54), the major distinction between art and aesthetic lies in the difference between doing and undergoing. While *art* generally refers to the creative act of the artist who employs skill to process aesthetic material, *aesthetic* refers to the experience of quality, or the act of appreciation, perception and enjoyment. As a point of departure, I use the term “aesthetic” in a broad sense to cover the entire processes of doing and undergoing, because aspects of production (the making of art) and consumption (the perception and judgment of art) are inseparably intertwined in the process of art teaching and learning.

<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the connection between aesthetic positions and social stratification, Bourdieu’s (1984) *Distinction* can be seen as an early effort to offer a sociological aesthetic. More recently, some scholars have advocated a “social aesthetics,” which either prioritizes the socio-political locations of aesthetic experiences and objects (Born et al., 2017) or, at a more abstract level, presents a theory of the cognitive components of social action by integrating aesthetic perception and judgment (Martin, 2011).

(Leschziner, 2015) and by the contingent and unpredictable nature of artistic creation (Menger, 2001). During aesthetic socialization, art students learn to negotiate the tension between adhering and deviating from rule-governed techniques and standards. Scholars have argued that learning techniques and practical knowledge of a domain can help novice students reconfigure rules and generate new ideas (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). This dialectical process is captured in Wilf's (2014) concept of "rituals of creativity," as jazz students learn to inhabit a master's improvisation through imitation and reenact the creative act as it unfolds. Thus, the capability of mimicking standards entails a game of playing with rules (Nylander, 2014). In the West, techniques are usually seen as the means by which artists turn ideas into form to differentiate themselves from peers (Fine, 2018). On the contrary, teenage art students in authoritarian countries like China are more heavily engaged in practicing techniques, as they must conform to standardized tests (Chumley, 2016). Rather than seeing technique as an end in itself, I will reveal that such students must simultaneously learn and unlearn techniques to achieve differentiation.

Conflicting evaluation systems, the criteria by which worth is given or assessed (Lamont, 2012), further produce tensions in art school and creative work at large. In educational settings, as they enter from prep schools to college-level art programs, art students are subject to different "evaluation regimes" (Chumley, 2013), which shift evaluative frameworks from standardized training of craft skill to identifying an individual self through meaning and language. Similarly, Nylander (2014) examines the structural ambiguity in the selection process during academic jazz auditions, in which students and teachers struggle to balance artistic uniqueness and standardized repertoire (i.e., numerical grading). In the cases of MFA programs, art students, embedded in both structures within an educational institution and beyond (the "hostile" art world), face a difficult career choice between being esteemed by their colleagues and pleasing their publics (Fine, 2017). Viewing institutional and market demands as constraints on their creative inclinations, art students must negotiate both the tensions between mastering techniques and styling selves, and between the demands of art and commerce.

More generally, creative workers are embedded in two different systems of valuation, experiencing the conflict between economic logic and artistic logic (Bourdieu, 1996). The clash of logics is evident in many fields of cultural production: graphic designers justify their commercial engagement by practicing boundary work — that is, separating or integrating the artistic and commercial motivations of their work (Rowe, 2018); drawing on different logics of creative assessment, occupational communities in interdisciplinary workplaces (i.e., advertising professionals) are in conflict due to competing definitions of good work (Koppman, 2014). It is strategic to examine varied tensions because artists are simultaneously involved in navigating multiple orders of worth, and such relationships between these orders may constitute a field's "landscape of practice" that structures meaning-making and sensemaking (Gerber, 2017: 111). In this article, I focus on how artists in the making, embedded in multiple evaluative frameworks that are both shifting and overlapping, navigate those areas of tension to get access to the institutions they aspire toward.

## 4. Case study: background and methods

### 4.1. Inside art test prep schools

China's college entrance examination has lower entry requirements for art school applicants than for regular test-taking students. Poorly performing students take advantage of this discrepancy by pursuing art studies (i.e., visual arts, music, dance) to continue their education at the post-secondary level. Since the late 1990s, the number of students taking art school entrance tests in China has rapidly increased, with such tests becoming centralized and standardized (Chumley, 2016). This increase gave rise to a lucrative industry — private art test prep schools. Provincial education bureaus implemented unified tests (*tongkao*) across China in 2008 to combat the growth of students using art school as a backdoor to college. Annually, around half a million students in China take unified tests in December. Tested subjects include chiaroscuro portraits, impressionist still life, and sketches. The first two subjects involve copying images, and the last sometimes involves drawing live models. Unified test results are then used to directly apply for less selective university-level art programs (usually second-tier or lower). Additionally, a passing unified test result allows students to take "art institute tests" (*xiaokao*) for higher-level art schools every March. In art institutes, students choose between separate art and design tracks. Both tracks include the three aforementioned subjects, while the design track has an extra test section on design. This assessment method was formalized by the 2015 reform. Unlike the unified test requirements described above, art institute tests ask students to interpret textual and/or visual materials provided to them. In addition to assessing technical competence, art institute tests require self-expression and improvisation. Both unified tests and art institute tests evaluate competence in realist art, while art history is not tested.

To prepare for various art tests, students typically spend between eight months and several years learning different techniques in art test prep schools, which teach the four subjects assessed in the art tests (see Fig. 1). In terms of artistic mediums and genres, realist drawing and painting are the only forms taught in prep schools. To help novice students master techniques in a short period of time, prep schools adopt two pedagogical practices: copying images and/or drawing live figures and objects. The former requires students to copy previously drawn figures and still lifes. Such a practice focuses on capturing the two-dimensional physical features of the image, and the goal is to achieve high verisimilitude. This model can help students get good grades relatively easily, since unified tests usually test students on copying images. In contrast, the other practice emphasizes drawing live models or still-life scenes, which involves a cognitive process of transforming the reality in the eye onto a painting on canvas. The goal is to not only achieve verisimilitude, but also allow students to incorporate personal expression into their work. Prep schools adopt this model when most students aim for prestigious art programs. In this case, prep schools must train students to be more sophisticated than those who are only able to copy images. This study focuses on the latter practice, as all observed prep schools trained students to draw live figures and objects; most of my informants prepared for art institute tests to enter elite art schools. Design courses train students to use their





Fig. 1. Students practice impressionist still lifes in an art test prep school in Beijing.

craft skill to materialize their ideas. Certain basic rules of design are still emphasized in class, and students are required to read design magazines or collect materials online on their own. Since most art teachers in prep schools were trained in fine arts, some schools hire working designers to teach this course.

#### 4.2. Data and methods

The data I collected includes two components. First, I conducted over 200 h of fieldwork in two art test prep schools in Beijing from June to August 2016. One of them is in urban Beijing, between the Old Summer Palace and Tsinghua University (hereafter I call this school Tsinghua Art School, TAS). There were around 16 students in this prep school preparing for the art test, and about the same number of younger students who enrolled in this training program only for the summer. Half of them were from Beijing, and others were from provinces nearby. Most of them have spent many years practicing drawing at home or in prep schools. The other school is in Songzhuang (hereafter SAS), a village in suburban Beijing that is a hub for the contemporary art community (the Old Summer Palace was an old hub in the 1990s). In this school, there were around 50 students. All of them were from provinces outside of Beijing and returned to their own province to take unified tests in December. Students in these two schools were different in two ways. For one, most students at TAS had experience of artistic training, while most students at SAS were novice art students. For another, most students at TAS aimed for the top art programs in China, including CAFA and Tsinghua University, and many were from middle class or upper-middle class families; the body of students at SAS was more diverse in class and artistic ambition. These two cases constitute a connective study as I examine thematic links between the two schools. In a rigid test system, students across social classes were engaged in a balancing of competence and differentiation. Students in both prep schools were no longer enrolled in their formal high schools and did not take academic courses until the art test was over. They studied and lived in prep schools and practiced drawing over 14 h a day, six days a week to prepare for both unified tests and art institute tests. I typically spent the mornings and afternoons at SAS, and the nights at TAS. I observed classrooms, volunteered as their model, and sometimes took sketch classes with students to get a better sense of the intense learning in prep schools. I had meals with teachers and students, noting their conversations. When classes ended at 9 p.m., I stayed until midnight to converse with students in an informal setting. Most students stayed up doing homework or practiced on their own until 2 a.m. This fieldwork allowed me to observe learning and creative processes *in situ*. Additionally, I visited four other large-scale art test prep schools in Beijing and Hangzhou to gain a holistic picture of how prep schools operated.

Second, to complement the ethnographic data, I conducted 30 in-depth interviews, which included 22 art students and 8 prep school owners and teachers. Each interview was between one hour and three hours long and was digitally recorded and transcribed. The art students were mostly from the two prep schools where I conducted fieldwork (17 out of 22), and some were current art students in college-level art programs. I also included 4 students who failed the art test last year to gauge their insights on prep school training from beginning to end. After each interview, I asked participants to take a survey on their interests and experiences in art. All names in this article are anonymized.

Field notes and interview transcriptions were coded using ATLAS.ti software. Employing a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), concepts and categories emerged in the process of fieldwork and coding. Early on, the data appeared to suggest the

theme of standardized pedagogies employed in both art test prep schools, which was what I initially expected to see. As the fieldwork evolved, the theme of students' ongoing negotiation between taught standards and their individual expression became salient in my memos. I continued to collect ethnographic data relevant to this insight. By the end of the fieldwork, I asked clarifying questions in semi-structured interviews to connect emerging insights across multiple data sources. While the field notes largely captured teaching and learning practices in art test prep schools, the interviews deepened understanding into how students actively played with taught standards. Theoretical codes of tension were gradually identified and further validated during the coding process. A close examination of such tensions led to a revision in the previous analytical concepts of creativity and constraints. I then recoded my data and refined the three subcategories of tension, and eventually developed an analytical framework of competence and differentiation that was more empirically grounded.

## 5. Negotiating competence and differentiation

### 5.1. *Learning and unlearning: a processual practice*

Entering the prep school, art students were required to master high-level skills of realist drawing. To become a competent candidate, students were taught to conform to certain standards favored in aesthetic valuations within the art test. For instance, Teacher Gu at TAS told students in a chiaroscuro class, "Before the art test, you should only draw this effect — light and shade, where the contrast is strong. This kind of drawing will be assessed as A-level." The teacher emphasized that to get good grades, one must conform to the conventions of "long hues" in assessing chiaroscuro portraits, meaning bold contrasts between light and dark that present a true three-dimensional appearance of the figure. If students follow such rules and master the craft, they would be judged as competent in the test. Similarly, Teacher Tang at SAS emphasized the importance of mastering structure for becoming a competent candidate, "What we are drawing is not art. We draw chiaroscuro portraits to master structure, with the same method employed at the Repin Academy of Fine Arts in Russia." By framing what they pursued as virtuosity at this stage, students were taught to draw a distinct boundary between art and their technique-oriented practices, and achieved technical competence through mastering standards of contrast and structure in realist drawing.

Craft skill, though important, should be employed to an appropriate degree during the art test. To excel on tests organized by top art institutes, students must also practice differentiation and create aesthetic objects which Becker (1982) calls "minor arts." Good artwork in the context of the art test is achieved by striking a balance between demonstrating both technical mastery and self-expression. A female student at TAS suggested, "I'm learning how to use black-white-grey patterns so I can transcend them. I'm learning the rules of color so that I can go beyond these rules. Deviating from convention is a matter of time." The standardized techniques that students acquired then became their "paintbox" (Klee, 1968), the foundation from which they *learned to unlearn*. Unlearning techniques of realist drawing compels students to lean more towards differentiation and create their own artistic visions through sophisticated deskilling. In the words of students and teachers, deskilling means to "have ideas" (*youxiangfa*): learning to control the use of techniques in order to "think," "observe," and "solve problems."

In practical terms, students were taught to employ techniques in appropriate contexts. For example, with two years of art training in a third-tier city in Shandong province prior to studying at TAS, Meng was told by her local teachers that demonstrating competent techniques would help her score higher on the art test. However, Teacher Yu identified her problem during a daily critique: "The lines in your sketch are not relaxed, because you care too much about lines. The less you know how to draw, the more humanity in your drawing, the better your drawing will be. Lines are a form of expression." For the teacher, the lines used in the sketch were supposed to be "relaxed" and "loose," so they could better capture the model's characteristics. In this case, technical mastery did matter, but techniques should be revealed in forms in natural manners, thus bringing in "more humanity." Meng, aspiring to study at the renowned Tsinghua University, confessed in the interview that she cared too much about techniques and ignored personal expression. The key was to balance between caring about techniques and improvising within conventions. Another case was Tao, who failed the art test in 2016 and decided to re-take it. As the most experienced student in the studio, he was stressed out by the performance of his peers.

Tao: It's easier for other students to implement the teacher's advice [to unlearn techniques]. But for me, it's really difficult to have that kind of expression. Because when you master techniques, you always bear them in mind and rely on them to cover up shortcomings. That makes your work look bad. You must let go of learned skills and go for a genuine feeling.

Researcher: But doesn't the art test assess your technical competence?

Tao: That's true. But we came to this studio to become higher-level painters. Everyone can master techniques, but how do you impress the professors who grade the test? To move them, you must draw from life in your art. There should be a sense of humanity in the portraits you draw, and a sense of the real in still lifes. Those are the qualities that others lack and will set you apart from other candidates.

As Tao suggested, excessive technical fluency could be considered a disadvantage on the art test. After years of training in prep schools, it was common for those experienced test-retakers to demonstrate their learned techniques, either to "cover up shortcomings" or to prove their superiority by displaying technical fluency in front of younger learners. Even though teachers encouraged them to unlearn techniques, those students found it more difficult to implement in practice. To become "higher-level" painters, they needed to display more personal expressions. For students like Tao, differentiation was often made possible by creating a sense of the "real," "humanity," and subjectivity in their work. The vocabulary they used echoed what their teachers emphasized in class: the

importance of presenting “feelings” (*ganjue*), “emotions” (*qinggan*), and producing “holistic” (*zhengtigan*) images. In all six art test prep schools I observed or visited, students and teachers used similar vocabulary to describe the process of deskilling. In Chumley’s (2016 : 137) account of creativity classes at CAFA, art professors similarly emphasized an “artwork feeling” and a “completed feeling” in reference to production values. As seen in experienced glassblowing artisans, the unlearning process described by Tao is embodied in their care about a project as a whole, rather than as separate components (O’Connor, 2005).

Students considered to “have ideas” by their peers and teachers were relatively “untrained.” Consider the compliments from Ning to Hui, two top students at TAS:

Hui uses very few techniques in his work. He doesn’t care about the rules and conventions (*tiaotiao kuangkuang*) our teachers emphasize. When he draws, he’s very casual (*suiyi*). He’s a realist, but his drawings are not constrained by the doctrines of realism. He’s really good at observing. When he doesn’t know how to proceed, he walks around the studio and observes how others draw. After absorbing our strengths and shortcomings, he sits back on his stool and magically transforms his work.

Embedded in the art test system, it was impossible for Hui not to care about rules and conventions, even though Ning perceived it the opposite way. Ning believed Hui was less constrained by doctrines, in part because Hui adopted a casual approach to conventions, thus delivering a natural feeling in creative outcomes. For aspiring students, being “casual” is a core quality for becoming an artist. The meaning of such vocabulary was further elaborated in Ning’s observation on Teacher Yu at work. An artist trained at the renowned China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, Teacher Yu looked “casual and full of joy” when he drew, according to Ning:

It’s important to be casual. I’ll feel upset if I have to conform to rules and conventions – and I’m not supposed to show that I’m upset. If you really liberate yourself when you draw, you’ll feel a moment of obsession. You feel you’re not here in the studio. Only you and the still life. That’s a special feeling.

In Ning’s description, a casual approach to the creative process projects a relaxed personality, and also entails an affective experience in aesthetic socialization, with such an approach enabling unlearning and a moment of “obsession” (Benzecry, 2011). In this process, Ning adjusted her approach to aesthetic rules to deliver a natural ease, through which she was able to improvise and express her subjectivity. I found Ning in this obsessive state on many occasions: doing a study of Gustave Courbet’s *The Man with a Pipe* (1848), designing a pair of sneakers in her dorm, and drawing late-night sketches of a pop singer she admired. In each case, her casual approach induced obsession, and technique was secondary to her vision.

However, “total unlearning” was discouraged in prep schools, as teachers would rein students in if they strayed too far from conventions. Sun, age 16, favored the “gloomy and uncomfortable” style of artist Gottfried Helnwein, whose subjects included wounded children. As a result, Sun’s own style was also “dark and abstract.” One night, she showed Teacher Yu a sketch of deformed human figures on a black background (see Fig. 2), which easily reminded the class of Picasso’s work. Teacher Yu commented, “Well done, but there should be more grey, more details,” in reference to rules of black-white-grey patterns in chiaroscuro. Sun raised her voice to defend her ideas, “But this is abstract art!” Teacher Yu pushed back: “Abstract art has details, too. Haven’t you seen Picasso’s paintings? His abstract artwork is very detailed. You have good ideas, but they need to be detailed.” In this case, the teacher was content with the student’s active pursuit of her creative style, but the execution of her vision did not meet his standards in chiaroscuro. While seeking differentiation was legitimate, excessive deskilling was inappropriate when her technical forms failed to follow the rules of chiaroscuro – the missing grey broke the natural transition between black and white, resulting in less detailed compositions. By situating Sun’s creative practice in both art history and the rules of chiaroscuro, Teacher Yu persuaded his most creative students to improvise within conventions.

“Learning to unlearn,” I argue, is achieved through two interrelated processes. First, art students learn to adjust their approaches to conventions and techniques in order to convey a natural ease. Second, such form of deskilling enables students an ability to improvise and deliver their artistic visions within the bounds of institutional conventions. Thus, learning to unlearn proposes a processual approach to artistic practices, with a focus on the ongoing process of skilling and deskilling. As Teacher Gu said, “Schools like CAFA try to admit students who are like rough unmolded clay. They don’t come across as craftsmen. Art professors can tell if



Fig. 2. A female student’s sketch work (draft).

students have trained in prep schools for years. With over-trained students, even if they get admitted, professors have to break their molds and remake them.” As such, unlearning is the work of molding, unmolding, and remaking. This practice is seen in Fine’s (2003) study of self-taught artists, whose authenticity is defined by a lack of institutional learning and distance from the art world. On a macro level, artists acquire skills progressively “through a process of learning-by-doing which is highly informative and which cannot be perfectly anticipated *ab initio*” (Menger, 2001: 252). Rather than a linear progression of selecting or rejecting techniques and aesthetics, artistic practices necessitate a sophisticated mediation between learning and unlearning.

## 5.2. Present demands and long-term goals: a reconciliation

Unlearning techniques to realize artistic vision resolves the divergent demands of the reformed art test. But in prep schools, the technical toolbox leads to another pressing issue on what to teach and what goals to achieve. In an organizational setting with overlapping objectives, teenage students learned to reconcile their short-term goal of university admission and long-term goal of occupational socialization. While the former required competence in certain aesthetics, the latter called for differentiation and aesthetic demands intrinsic to creative industries.

University entrance was the most urgent goal for all students, and it was often the only goal for those with little passion for art. To enter university-level art programs, students first needed to do well on the standardized art test. This goal was clearly embodied in the English name of SAS: “Results Art Studio.” For better results, students practiced craft skill in the realm of realism, the only genre assessed by art institutes. Chumley (2016) describes it as “art test realism” (ATR), an aesthetic genre of technical realism exclusively reproduced in prep schools for the sake of the art test, in contrast to official realism and avant-garde realism.<sup>4</sup> But what ATR shares with other types of realism, as Chumley (2016) argues, is the focus on an aesthetic of passivity, embodied in the passive faces of blue-collar workers in students’ work. Such a passive aesthetic was seen in both prep schools I observed: the subjects students typically drew in chiaroscuro classes were portraits of working-class people, with passive or stern facial expressions. Students, especially those at SAS, were not unfamiliar with those subjects, since many who practiced in smaller cities were from working-class families. Moreover, this passive aesthetic echoes students’ own passivity – sitting still on stools and drawing ceaselessly (see Fig. 3). Art teachers at both schools employed the Foucauldian “exhaustive use” (Chumley, 2016: 81) to discipline students’ bodies by making them sit still and practice techniques from 8 a.m. to midnight.

Teachers were reflexive about the emphasis on technical realism. As Teacher Yu remarked, “What we practice before the test is mainly about realist art. Realist art and abstract art are two different concepts and realms. We can’t just teach novice students to do contemporary art. How can contemporary art be tested? We have to teach students to tackle the test first.” With the understanding that proficiency in contemporary art could not be quantitatively measured, teachers reiterated that their students’ main priority was learning technical realism to perform well on tests. In one class, Teacher Gu showed his students van Gogh’s *The Siesta* (1890) to exemplify the mastery of color. He told students that impressionist still lifes must feature “middle hues” (low light-shade contrast), and that the colors must be unified. *The Siesta* featured two figures taking a nap by a haystack, with a stark contrast between the deep blue of the background, and the bright gold of the foreground.

One female student asks, “I wonder if van Gogh could pass the art test if he was born in China.” Teacher Gu replies, “Of course. It’s so good...look at the contrast.” The student contests, “Really? But the colors in this painting are incongruous. They are not middle hues.” Facing the unexpected challenge, Teacher Gu pauses and then explains, “Of course professors know it’s a masterpiece. They are not idiots. This is real art.... But maybe you guys should not try this type of expression too much.”

Practices such as teaching color conventions of ATR were designed to help students construct their “paintbox” in the context of the art test, while displaying van Gogh’s work was to push students to gradually develop their artistic identity and enter the art world. In practice, students often realized there was a gap between the aesthetics of ATR in their test-driven practice and the aesthetics of, in Teacher Gu’s words, “real art.” Students thus were simultaneously encouraged to move closer to the art world while remaining within the confines of ATR, as their teacher suggested they avoid self-expression that might be seen by art professors as being “too free.” Gradually, many students internalized the urgent demands of the art test, with even top students prioritizing university applications over artistic ambitions.

Technical realism was by no means the only aesthetic taught in prep schools; in reality, a long-term goal of occupational socialization was always embedded in everyday practice. This goal, theoretically unnecessary for test prep schools, indicated reflexivity within the organization to help art students fulfill both short-term demands and their entry into creative professions. Most prep schools called themselves “art studios” or “art schools” (rather than training centers), to imply that occupational and even moral socialization were significant components in addition to test preparation. “Your ultimate goal is to become an artist or a designer,” a teacher told his students. “Passing the art test is just a bonus.” Such a demand also came from the parents who paid for training expenses and expected their children to get a job as a creative worker. When parents chose a prep school for their children, they often asked: “Can my kid get a job after she graduates from art school? What kind of professions does your studio specialize in?”<sup>5</sup> Teachers often shared their own stories of studying at China’s top art institutes, allowing students to grasp what it meant to be a budding artist,

<sup>4</sup> Official realism refers to socialist political realism that promotes state propaganda in Soviet-inspired contexts, and avant-garde realism refers to an artistic genre embodied in the passive workers featured in, for instance, contemporary artist Liu Xiaodong’s paintings and Jia Zhangke’s movies (see also Chumley, 2016: 93–121).

<sup>5</sup> As a marketing device, some prep schools advertised that their students often got into certain universities. For instance, SAS often sent students to study fashion design at the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology; another two prep schools next to SAS funneled students to study stage design at the Central Academy of Drama.





**Fig. 3.** Students practice chiaroscuro portraits in an art test prep school in suburban Beijing, demonstrated by their teacher sitting in the front. The subjects typically include portraits of working-class people, featuring passive faces.

and what future roles they might pursue. Some art teachers at both schools were interested in video games, so they frequently talked about the profession of game design while playing videos games with students. In one instance, Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* was screened to introduce production design. Teacher Zhang, owner of TAS and an oil painter himself, often organized weekend trips for students to check out galleries and art exhibits. The goal was to help students cultivate a better understanding of creative industries and their occupational environments.

Tension was inherent in the goals of practicing ATR and occupational socialization in two ways. For one thing, due to time constraints in preparation for the art test, occupational socialization often had to give way to learning ATR. Students confessed in interviews that they did not spend as much time going to galleries or reading design magazines as they should have, which in turn negatively impacted their performance in the art test's design section. For another, while obtaining university admission involved an aesthetic of passivity and disciplining the body to be judged as competent, becoming an aspirational creative worker required opposing aesthetic qualities that favored differentiation from conventions. To achieve equilibrium between the ATR test and occupational socialization, students reconfigured the rules of ATR in their preferred subjects, such as Japanese anime figures, or created "non-test related" works as a creative outlet, especially at night. These extra efforts emphasized their innate imaginations to help students develop occupational identities, as a counter against their restricted physical regimen at school when preparing for the short-term goal of passing the art test.

To resolve the contradiction, teachers guided students to find common ground between the two goals by emphasizing a moral dimension in regard to artistic practices: that is, both the learning and making of art involve attitude, perspectives, and resilience – qualities crucial for the students' educational *and* professional lives. The use of moral discourses to suggest congruences between present demands and long-term goals was prevalent in both schools, even among those young instructors who were recent art school graduates. As the owner of TAS stated, "The meaning of art education is not about teaching skills to students. It's about how they deal with a problem, how they see the world, and their passion for art. I teach them how to stay focused on one thing for 14 h each day. My former students are grateful that they learned important qualities here that helped them excel as professionals." For teenage art students, concentrating on one thing intensively in an eight-month training period was challenging. The owner of TAS linked the dedication and hardship of the ART test preparation (i.e., practicing techniques day and night) to individual virtues that were critical to developing a coherent occupational identity and a more successful artistic career (i.e., problems solving, worldviews, passion). Teachers encouraged students to endure the exhaustive conditions in the training because it was beneficial for excelling both on the art test and on their future occupation as art professionals. In other words, by using moral discourses, being a "good, diligent student" is aligned with the goal of growing to be a "good artist." These discourses were especially effective when teachers told students that these were the lessons learned by former students who later succeeded.

Occasionally, teachers used inspiring life stories of masters to socialize students into the moral spirit of striving under difficult conditions, suggesting congruences between two different stages of artistic practices. For instance, one teacher shared Andy Warhol's

life story with his students in class: Warhol worked in restaurants or bars during the day and created in his underground studio at night, going through the grueling process of trying to “make it.” The purpose of sharing this story was to help students make sense of their current hardship in preparing for the ATR test. If such a moral spirit of enduring hardship was even common for successful professional artists, it was thus acceptable and perhaps necessary for achieving the current goal of university admissions. Students gradually internalized these moral discourses, as they frequently referred to inspiring stories told by their teachers. Hui, a talented student from a humble family, told me that Monet could not afford food. “He painted on one canvas, covered it with new paint, and covered it again...a difficult life. I’m inspired by his experience.” Poverty and perseverance were not uncommon for young learners at both schools. Shared moral expectations allowed students to make sense of their disciplined training and difficulties irrespective of their social backgrounds; these moral expectations also elevated the students’ self-perceptions of personal worth and dignity (Lamont, 2000), while they strived for both passing the ATR test and manufacturing a coherent professional identity. As such, art students were simultaneously socialized to the idea that they were both serious learners and perseverant artists in the making, thus resolving the tension between entering college and the creative professions.

### 5.3. Artist and designer identities: a paradox

The art school helps students foster creative learning in techniques and aesthetics, as well as artistic selves (Fine, 2017). Whatever path they choose, Chinese students must go through the similar training and take the art test, so they are collectively known as “art students.” Covering various domains and practitioner types, “art” is a wide tent with highly contested meanings regarding artistic identity. Art students I observed were socialized to draw boundaries between *artist* and *designer*, in terms of visualizing their occupational identities. Very few students I encountered during my fieldwork aspired to become fine artists engaged in painting, sculpture, illustration, video, and/or printmaking. By contrast, most students planned to work in the design industry, i.e., gaming, fashion, industrial design, urban landscaping, stage lighting. Situated in two evaluative systems, students heavily favored the identity of the designer over that of the artist. As I will demonstrate, the reason why Chinese students chose design over art was because they paradoxically sought to embody the aesthetic qualities of idealized Western artists.

This paradox arose from the contrasting images of Western artists and Chinese artists socialized within prep schools. After China’s fine art education was first westernized during the Republican Era (1912–1949), the country’s art students have been influenced by Western and Soviet traditions at various periods. Students in prep schools I observed generally believed that Western artists, compared to their Chinese counterparts, were more creative and professional, and had more appealing artistic lifestyles. I find that Modernist, Realist, and (Neo-)Classicist artists were the most frequently mentioned figures in both prep schools.<sup>6</sup> Among them, van Gogh, Picasso, and Monet respectively topped the list dominated by Western artists. When referring to these artists, students often called them “a true/great artist,” or just simply “master.” They interpreted artist reputations in two ways. First, students emphasized the eccentricity of the masters, which was arguably the most stereotypical image of artists across historical epochs. They believed that van Gogh, Dürer, and Caravaggio were “eccentric, weird, abnormal,” or had “strong personalities.” Students shared a legend that, although van Gogh had a strong inner compulsion, it was only during drunken or schizophrenic states that he could create something like *The Starry Night* (1889). Second, students highlighted the expressiveness and distinct styles in those artists’ works. Picasso was “seemingly childish but in fact brilliant”; Cézanne was “non-traditional”; Lucian Freud’s work showed his sophisticated skills of observation. Those masters could “fully express themselves” and “reveal their inner self.” The emphasis on self-expressiveness stood in stark contrast with the reality that Chinese art students had a limited zone of discretion. The prestige associated with these masters was also shared by contemporary Western artists, with such perceptions being shaped by both classroom and online sources. In particular, students emphasized the physical and spiritual “space” afforded to Western artists:

Ning: “Chinese artists don’t have as much space as Western artists do.... I mean Western artists have their own studios. They have strong personalities. They can travel whenever they want. Just carry your drawing board and canvases to create anywhere in the world. They’re super individualistic. Although Chinese artists also have their own studios, they’re not as carefree.”

Researcher: “Is it that the lifestyle you want after you graduate from art schools?”

Ning: “Yes, I want to be like a Western artist. I’ve always wanted to see the world, and I want to paint forever.”

A year later, Ning passed the art test but chose Digital Media Arts (design track) as her major. Although she could have become a painter due to her relatively wealthy background, she took a different path that would potentially provide her with more desirable space, regarding both physical conditions and creative freedom. She wanted to be like a “Western” artist, whereas Chinese artists were not “as carefree,” lacking a core quality celebrated in the ideal image of the artist. The rationale of her professional choice directed our attention to investigate how students in art test prep schools conceived of “Chinese” artists.

In contrast to notions of Western artistic prestige, the image of Chinese artists socialized in prep schools was generally undesirable: they had less freedom, were less creative, and had little personality. For most students, their perceptions of Chinese artists were “poor,” “dirty and had long hair,” and “irresponsible.” Additionally, they believed Chinese artists usually had isolated or repetitive lifestyles. One student remarked that he did not like the lifestyle of Chinese artists because they were “too solitary, living in woods like hermits,” while he preferred to work in a modern urban studio. An artist-teacher at SAS offered a radical remark in class:

<sup>6</sup> Modernism in this case includes van Gogh, Picasso, Monet, and Cézanne; Realism includes Freud, Courbet, and Chen Danqing; and (Neo-)Classicism includes da Vinci, Raphael, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Dürer, and Ingres.

“Chinese artists are a bunch of clowns. They are even worse than people in the entertainment industry. They do whatever other people make them do. No personality at all.” To rationalize such a discrepancy, students and teachers believed it was the “fault of state systems,” which provided little aesthetic and philosophical training in formal education. Teachers explained that the image of Chinese artists shifted from a “princely man” in the past to a “poor clown” today, due to the cultural discontinuity that began with the founding of the New China in 1949. In this process, teachers played a significant role in denouncing Chinese artists while valorizing certain kinds of Western artists. In one class, students were encouraged by the teacher to work harder and stay productive so that they could excel in the future, distinguishing themselves from ordinary Chinese artists who were often perceived negatively. To give an example, the teacher mentioned Dafeng village in Guangdong, a contract-painting town full of skilled Chinese painters producing reproductions of famous Western works, such as that of van Gogh’s (Wong, 2014). The teacher dismissively spoke of Dafeng to his students, “Those painters in the ‘da Vinci village’ produce paintings on a production line. Some paint leaves, some paint trunks, and some paint the sky.” Students listened wide-eyed, and the teacher said sarcastically: “But they are very productive, better than you guys.” By framing those Chinese painters as workers engaging in repetitive work through the division of labor, the teacher warned his students not to become one of those unexciting workers. But his sarcasm indicated that, with the current unsatisfied productivity, students were unlikely to develop a better career than those painters. Although Western artists such as Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons can be arguably seen as having a similar style with those Dafeng artists, the hostility to Chinese artists does not extend to their Western counterparts.

It is worth noting that dissident artists in the Chinese contemporary art world were rarely mentioned in the classroom, and students seemed to know little about this group of artists. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that those activist artists known to Western audiences, such as Ai Weiwei, were largely excluded from students’ general perception of Chinese artists discussed above. While most teachers I encountered were familiar with renowned artists in contemporary China (names such as Ai Weiwei, Xu Bin, and Cai Guoqiang were frequently referenced during our interviews), they rarely used these artists as exemplars in the classroom. This reminds us that students were socialized only to a selection of Western and Chinese artists resonant with their current priorities. If we regroup those aforementioned Western masters by the subjects they worked on, they were masters of color — illustrations ranging from van Gogh to Monet — and masters of figurative art that required sophisticated techniques in realist drawing. This specific selection echoed the curricular content of art test prep schools, addressing the interplay between artistic reputation of the past and present demands in the aesthetic institution. There were of course exceptions to the negative image of Chinese artists. Some students remarked that Chen Danqing, the most referenced Chinese artist by students in both prep schools, was “individualistic and anti-institutional.” Others regarded Leng Jun, a surrealist artist, as “the one and only,” and Jidi, a self-taught Chinese cartoonist, as having a “unique style.” Nevertheless, most teenage students had a negative impression of Chinese artists and rejected an identity that did not resemble the lives of the Western artists they admired. This was exacerbated by the fact that another identity was available to them: that of the designer.

The major difference between art and design is that “art responds to personal, subjective criteria, but design products must perform for people,” such as clients or customers (Davis, Hawley, McMullan & Spilka, 1997: 3; see also Sawyer, 2018). Most students I encountered wanted to become designers who worked for clients, rather than artists who were relatively more autonomous. One female student at TAS explained, “Fine artists make a living by their inspirations, but creative workers can’t just do whatever they want. If I do a commercial design project, I need to follow the client’s needs.” Aspiring to be an industrial designer, the student rationalized her choice by accepting unavoidable constraints in design work – that is, its imperatives toward conforming to clients. A logical explanation for students to choose design over art was the access to better job prospects. Many students agreed: “I like painting and sculpture, but I think I’ll study design instead. It’s easier to get a job.” One prep school owner remarked, “There’s all kinds of crap in the contemporary art world. When you become a painter, you’ll most likely be unemployed.” In contrast, design industries were seen as being “highly valued in China’s current economic structure,” bringing students more job opportunities.

Economic calculations, however, were only one aspect of a more complex equation when students desired to be designers; the other aspect was about the symbolic meaning tied to this profession. Many students thought that designers were “cool and “social,” and had “a lot of interesting ideas.” One student said he wanted to study design because “it doesn’t focus on how you draw, it’s about your ideas.” This view was echoed by another student: “I want to do product design. Something creative. Something inspiring. Apple has been doing great. Why? Because they’re inspired. Because of designers.” Besides few students with a clear design dream (i.e., one student wanted to study automobile design at the Rhode Island School of Design), most teenage students seeking the design track had limited knowledge of what specific design work would entail in practice. Their romantic perceptions of design and the designer mostly came from design classes in prep schools. While the two foundational classes of composition in fine art (chiaroscuro portraits and impressionist still life) usually conform to clearly-stated conventions regarding techniques, design classes, with relatively fewer specific rules, were seen to reward differentiation and “ideas.” Every time I asked students to talk about “creativity” (*chuangzaoli*), they would naturally start to share their thoughts on design classes, their current design works, and designer as a profession they aspired toward (see Fig. 4). They seemed to draw an equivalence between design and creativity, championing qualities such as “preferences,” “self-expressiveness,” and “imagination” in design that were similarly valued in their idealized image of Western artists. Despite the inherent conformity of the design industry, most students believed that doing design in prep schools was a precious venue for them to differentiate from rigid conventions in the art test system, thus seeing the design track as more desirable. Some students suggested that doing design is “not confined within the conventions of fine art,” and a designer’s social circle and lifestyle would “bring more artistic inspirations.” In their narratives, students idealized designers in the same way they idealized artists in the Western tradition, as both occupational roles were seen by students to generate ideas, rely on differentiation, and celebrate romanticized lifestyles (i.e., social and symbolic status). Young learners who pursued design over painting felt that being a “Chinese” artist was not commensurate with becoming a “real” artist – one with a “strong personality” and their own “spiritual and





Fig. 4. A student's design work (draft).

physical space.” This platonic ideal of the artist, which was shaped by the aesthetic socialization of Western art in prep schools, was thus counterintuitively perceived as attainable through becoming a designer, an increasingly valued profession in China's new economy.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

This article analyzes how art students negotiate multiple institutional tensions to balance competence and differentiation. I perform this analysis in the novel context of Chinese art test prep schools, with an emphasis on the aesthetic socialization in which students respond to institutional judgments in the making of art and selves. While mastering technical competence, students are engaged in the processual practice of learning to unlearn, which involves an active shifting between skilling and deskilling to deliver a natural feeling. This process constitutes a prefiguration of artistic development, giving rise to the creative possibilities of what Chumley (2016) calls self-styling in a later stage. More generally, it echoes anthropologist Bateson, 1972 concept of deutero-learning, or “learning to learn” (Wilf, 2014b). While individuals follow rules and learn how they are enacted, they can concurrently generate new rules, as shown in the studies of jazz education (Nylander, 2014; Wilf, 2014a). Additionally, to align their short-term and long-term goals, students and teachers locate common ground by emphasizing moral values shared in both test preparation and creative work. This finding exemplifies the intertwined relationship between aesthetics and morality (Hanquinet, 2018; Wolff, 2008), and shows how morality can be used to bridge individuals across social classes and different goals, in addition to drawing symbolic distinction (Lamont, 2000). A balancing of short-term and long-term interests is shared in other creative sectors, such as book publishing (Childress, 2017) and commercial film production (Elberse, 2013). Finally, students' aspirations to be designers, rather than fine artists, are paradoxically connected to their pursuit of aesthetic qualities central to idealized Western artists. This paradox is rooted in the hierarchical reputations of Western and Chinese artists socialized within prep schools.

This study presents an analysis of a distinctive process of aesthetic socialization in the postmodern era. The Chinese case serves as an illustration of what Ugo Corte et al. (2019) described as “a nexus of history, present knowledge, and future directions” in the conception of creativity. Chinese art students are introduced to those traditions of Western art which prioritize certain aesthetic genres and movements. These traditions interact with the present aesthetic of art test realism to shape how students approach their artistic practices and imagine future selves. Those Western artistic movements socialized within prep schools thus become a playground for Chinese students, within which they grapple with the meaning of contemporary art and the status of artists. Since the prestige of Western art and artists is perpetuated, it further discourages teenage students from aspiring to become a contemporary artist in China. Thus, for Chinese art students, the choice of becoming an artist is not merely about *whether* to enter the art world or not, but about *which* art world to enter: art test realism or “real” art, Chinese or Western, fine art or design. As such, the Chinese case exists as an alternative domain with distinct practices and imperatives.

Examining tensions in aesthetic socialization in a local context constitutes an account of what Fine (2018: 220) calls “a meso-level sociology of inspiration,” emphasizing the emergence of creativity from an interactive community and the significance of local traditions, collective action, shared aesthetics, and institutional structures. The concept of aesthetic socialization suggests that sociologists studying artistic practices must attend to a broad domain of creative processes, which includes technique, aesthetic genres, occupational roles, and artistic identities. It calls for the attention on collective work as well as conflict in artistic evaluation and occupational identity, which are central to the sociological studies of creative work. Moreover, this concept joins a burgeoning literature that emphasizes the aesthetic content in sociological analyses of the arts (De La Fuente, 2007; Wohl, 2019), by accounting for the relationship between aesthetic meaning and institutional judgment.

This study raises insights into how tensions are negotiated in the course of aesthetic socialization. There are many other rule-governed institutional settings in which individuals must construct themselves through navigating competing forces, in order to get access to those aesthetic institutions that will make them professionals. Those aesthetic domains, firstly, include many art programs



in secondary and post-secondary education around the world that have become increasingly standardized and ritualized (Wilf, 2014a). While areas of tension may be particular to empirical cases, they serve as the sites for sociologists to analyze aesthetic decisions responding to institutional imperatives. Additionally, those aesthetic domains extend to a variety of creative work involving coaching and other forms of apprenticeship. For instance, an aspiring student, mentored by an established poet in a creative writing program, must demonstrate her competence by conforming to certain conventions in poetry writing (i.e., form and technique), but also show a measure of distinctiveness in aesthetics to excel among her peers and be recommended by the teacher for publication opportunities. An inspiring cook works with a renowned chef to learn the criteria of the judgment to be a good chef, balancing competence with differentiation in practice so as to be seen as a qualified member of the elite culinary world. Examining the micro-processes of navigating tensions in aesthetic socialization offers sociologists an opportunity to analyze how individuals learn to make creative decisions to enter an aesthetic institution as well as the art world.

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