

An Exploration for Happiness through Education: The Value of Humanities in Chinese Fine Arts Courses

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Abstract: This paper explores and unpacks the connections between humanities, fine arts education, and happiness. The domain is within China. When doing this, the relevant definitions, interpretations, and origins must be revealed. So representative researchers' previous works are referred to for better understanding and accuracy. Level by level, it manifests that humanities education has excellent value for one's happiness which cannot be easily ignored. And from the relevant academic works, fine arts education, as one form of arts education (the other ones will not be discussed in this paper), is supposed to be a very effective way to deliver humanities education. But in many cases in China, acceptable arts courses didn't perform perfectly regarding this particular issue. Aesthetics abilities are highlighted in discussions on Chinese acceptable arts courses. However, educators or researchers use this phrase without deep insight or comprehensive understanding. The paper also tackles this one and builds the bridge from aesthetics to human happiness.

Keywords: Humanities Education, Fine Arts, Happiness, Aesthetics, Aesthetic Pleasure

1. Introduction

As the material world develops faster and faster, it appears that people are not becoming happier and happier. From the book *Suicide* by Durkheim [1], we can see that people have been suffering from pains in the mental or spiritual world. The situation didn't get better nowadays. It is natural to pursue happiness for a human being. However, daily news, social lives, books on social sciences, personal lives, etc., often tell stories about unhappiness. In China, data on depression cases have been rising dramatically not only in the adult group but also among children and teens during recent years. It makes me curious and starts to wonder if successes in the economy or other achievements or various entertainments can be sufficiently satisfying if one is to seek happiness or at least well-being.

To solve the problem, understanding human beings on a deep level should be the best first step. And the discipline of humanities is the key to understanding human beings. Through literature review, humanities education is given high credits by authors like Helen Small [2], Martha C. Nussbaum [3], and MazaOrtega Edgardo [4]. Martha [3] revealed the direct link between happiness and arts education, combined with humanities education. Though arts cover different forms, only fine arts education in China will be discussed as a typical example in this article. It is a pity that so far, the research world of Chinese fine arts education hasn't ideally addressed the issues of humanities education. Humanities education was only mentioned frequently, highly valued, and profoundly

analyzed in other disciplines. So this article is written to fill the blank, aiming to make a contribution to finding an effective way for people to achieve happiness.

2. A Comprehensive Way to See Humanities

Though the definition and branched disciplines of humanities may vary from country to country, culture to culture, or from time to time, it is worthwhile to see from a broader, more original and more comprehensive view. From some conceptions a general sense of humanities can be gotten. Like in *The Value of Humanities* [2], it is defined as: “The humanities study the meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity.” (P32)

2.1. Views from Rens Bod on Humanities

More specifically, Humanities were studied and organized very thoroughly by Rens Bod [5]. Humanities were defined in her research as “the disciplines that investigate the expressions of the human mind”, which is much more straightforward and easier to grasp, and similar to but more resumptive than the definition by Helen Small [2]. Rens Bod [5] clarified that the expressions of the human mind covered language, music, art, literature, theatre, and poetry. So she demonstrated humanities through specific disciplines of philology, linguistics, historiography, musicology, art theory and history, archeology, logic, rhetoric, literary studies, and theatre studies in her book *The New History of Humanities*, in chronological order. Then readers can see the detailed relationships between humanities’ interpretation in the visual art discipline, which is not merely a reflection or simulation of the real world. In other words, fine arts are not merely some skills to describe the world’s reality from a sense of humanities. And obviously, humanities is not just some Confucian theories or philosophy or pursuit. Especially when the author cited quite a few Chinese visual artworks, still almost all of them are more than visual presentation skills or patriotism or a heritage of traditional culture. For any researchers who want to stress humanities in fine arts education, it’s necessary to check further lots of concrete examples and arguments related to art discipline and humanities and their connections, interpretations, implications, etc., at least making considerations in an international comparative way to observe Chinese visual arts, surely the same for fine arts courses.

2.2. Views on Values of Humanities

For the topic, Martha C. Nussbaum [3] has carried out a series of studies in her book *Not for Profit*. Her observation and thoughts covered several aspects, including the connections between liberal education and democracy, the positive effects of humanities education on cultivating morals and emotions like empathy, the significance of Socratic pedagogy (argument) to achieve democracy, and its drawbacks which can be compensated for by arts education.

Several of her theories are inspiring, among which she holds as conclusions strongly. Her words were sometimes astonishing as lots of the descriptions reminded the reader of the phenomena of China, though she wrote the book out of an American background where democracy is highlighted. She described people or parents who made light of liberal and arts education in choosing courses or majors for themselves or their children, especially during economic hardship or simply because of family financial difficulties. And she used an Indian pedagogy model to illustrate standardized examinations, and only advanced skills were not sufficient or complete, even if the education was for economic growth. After pointing out the essential role of humanities/liberal/arts education, Martha listed several abilities (non-measurable) people need to achieve democracy or happiness or other goals, implying that arts education can cultivate them [3].

Sympathetic imagination and sympathy were noted as very important morals for democratic citizens. And this, as well as quality of emotions and healthy personalities, was later more detailedly demonstrated in the chapter on Cultivating Imagination. Martha produced a beautiful work there, revealing how the education of literature and arts can contribute to cultivating children's imaginative and emotional abilities and sympathy. She also praised arts education for creating chances for people to experience different genders, races, ethnicities, and cultures, which may release people from fear and anxiety. Before this chapter, she discussed Socratic methods, giving credit to critical thinking from the perspective of philosophy. And together with innovation, critical thinking was again mentioned for the pursuit of democracy or economic development, or even healthy business culture in this chapter, where she said that humanistic liberal arts education was exactly needed [3].

Lastly, Martha bought up the point that financial sufficiency was not necessarily the precondition of arts education. She showed specific rural examples to prove her point. And it is noticeable when she is mentioning arts education can gather children from different hierarchies. Besides all these benefits, it is also said arts education can increase children's motivation for other school activities [3].

At the end of the book, Martha strengthened all her arguments, putting the issue into a global view, but still with a mainly American perspective. Recent relevant improvements, shortcomings, challenges, etc., were covered. If a particular country she didn't cover or was not profound enough, the discussions of the topic need considering according to that country's different factors. Except for this part, her studies and recommendations are worthy of reference, which showed nonnegligible values to happiness.

2.3. Connections between Humanities, Fine Arts and Happiness

Martha's work [3] shows that arts education is an effective way to enable people to achieve happiness or other major goals. Since fine arts is one of the various forms of arts, fine arts education must play a role in providing access to happiness. If to look more at the importance of humanities education in art courses, a book titled *The Value of Humanities* is worth reading. It tackled with the issue from the very basic foundations, starting from the angle of conceptions or definitions and a much wider background of each relevant item, including what is "happiness" and what is "value".

Its author, Helen Small, listed humanities values in her book. Firstly, humanities can take the part of subjectivity while other social sciences or sciences take part with "less subjectivity". Secondly, humanities would enable people to gain a deeper and better understanding of happiness and then better implements to pursue happiness as well as to achieve a higher quality of pleasure besides the mere enjoyment offered by economic benefits. Thirdly, humanities education equips students with skills to exert themselves in a wide range of practical activities, contributing to the protection of culture and the cultural inheritance that nurtures the present [2].

Helen interpreted humanities within the political context a lot but demonstrated connections between humanities and other disciplines and mentioned the overlap of humanities and arts education. It was also covered that humanities directly contributed to financial benefits like the knowledge economy. Even the detailed differences between individual happiness and collective happiness were not omitted. Her arguments reveal that humanities shared many common standpoints with various aspects of human beings for the overall merits, which is universally applicable at least to a certain extent.

3. Humanities Education Valued in Many Disciplines

When looking broader and deeper into the humanities topic, more popped up. Interestingly, if only looking for the keyword "humanities", most of them are about the suggestion for integrating medical education and humanities education (some call it humanistic education). Kohrman Nathan narrated a

medical student from the University of Southern California who thought that humanities education could prepare students to be better doctors, but this was commonly ignored [6]. Nathan noted that the voice of the student was not idiographic. The next year Chen Lizhi pointed out that medicine is not only science but also humanities. This author linked the quality of the medical personnel and the efficiency of patients' recovery or well-being, highlighting the key role of humanistic education or training in cultivating qualified medical students [7]. Being specific in the area of rehabilitation medical education, Haimen Liu and Guan Fu wrote an efficient essay in which a new medical model was provided. This model references the innovative teaching strategy in integrating humanistic education and rehabilitation medicine [8]. Song P and Tang W credited humanities in medical education to promoting a medical humanistic spirit [9]. And there is even a research group on the status quo, problems, and reform strategies of oral medicine humanistic education in China. The list goes on.

Besides the discipline of medicine, other branches of science also showed callings for humanities education. There is a whole book covering the issues of humanities education: *Integration of Engineering Education and the Humanities: Global Intercultural Perspectives: Proceedings of the Conference Integrating Engineering Education and Humanities for Global Intercultural Perspectives, 20–22 April 2022, St. Petersburg, Russia* [10]. Among these many authors, Kuznetsova Alvina states that the current phase of scientific and technical development has brought the unification of engineering and humanitarian paradigms to the stage in a time of "Industry 4.0". The idea is that cognitive sciences and socio-humanitarian knowledge are essential in modern professional engineering education [11]. MazaOrtega Edgardo made a scary title in his research: "Only Humanities Education Will Save Us from Extinction". He describes social discontent and negative emotions like abuse, weariness, and anger in a large part of society, which is not only a local (Chilean) phenomenon. The studies of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are proclaimed to have a disastrous influence on future citizens. And he suggests that education in the humanities is the way out [12].

4. The Situation in Fine Arts Education in China

What is the case of humanities education in the specific discipline of fine arts in China? Those researching the relationships between humanities education and fine arts education, or on the evaluation of humanities education in fine arts education, are relatively very few in comparison with the relevant research in other disciplines. The position of humanities is also more frequently put high in language education. It seems that people in the academic world and fine arts education area either take humanities education for granted in the arts education or commonly neglect it. Or, even if mentioned and discussed, the item of *humanities* was not deeply looked into, like mentioned at the beginning of this writing. Among essays relevant to fine arts education, researchers explored a lot on the aspects of teaching methodologies and strategies, goals of modern fine arts education like creativity and innovation ability, cultivation of aesthetic judgment, and so forth. So far much of the research relevant to fine arts education was carried out within the area of itself, ignoring all the necessary comparisons. Some may follow the latest hot topics which involve technologies, for example, how modern technologies affect fine arts, or how to apply advanced technologies to arts education, or how fine arts education plays a role in technology development. But even for cultivating creative or innovative abilities in technologies, the integration of humanities education can contribute, as discussed in those engineering and technology-relevant papers.

Haipeng Jiang's essay intends to call for a reform in fine arts education in China's colleges and universities. The reason was that the current teaching concept and mode or models were too traditional and simple, as he claimed. The author described some detailed issues, such as the isolated focus on students' art professional skills/painting skills, the limitation of teaching within classrooms, and the

ignorance of aesthetic awareness and abilities. He suggested that fine arts teachers expand and consolidate students' theoretical and cultural art knowledge, diversify their teaching methods, and increase aesthetic elements in their classes. It was also recommended to invite experts from art industry to give lectures, which was good for cultivating innovation and practical abilities. Moreover, students were advised to attend art competitions to stimulate the sense of competition. The author stated a lot but didn't give much justification, nor the justification for the necessity of competitive sense in fine arts. And it is curious when he said traditional cultural education could allow students to experience all emotions and lead to good moralities and sound characters [13].

Though Haipeng Jiang's thesis was not that outstanding, some suggestions were already implemented in reality, but they can be representative when looking into China's fine arts education. Jiang's ideas are not rare among Chinese researchers. Some authors even shared the same intentions when considering the goals of fine arts education: cultivating talents that society needs. There are a few articles that agree with the integration of humanities and fine arts education. However, it appeared that Chinese researchers' understanding of humanities/humanistic quality stopped at the level of familiarity with traditional culture and good morals, including patriotism. Also, the word "aesthetics" was so closely bound with fine arts which few authors discussed thoroughly the conceptions and meanings or implications in their short essays, which were again narrowly linked to Chinese traditional culture and patriotic morals.

Indeed, when discussing fine arts education, the focus on Chinese traditional culture in the Chinese academic world cannot be ignored. What are the representative figures' theories or teachings in education or about humanities? One of the figures is Confucius. Papers relevant to Confucianism and societies, it showed some clues why previous research often conveyed those pursuits of social values and morals as recorded. Confucius' philosophy on education was about building up perfect personalities and cultivating a harmonious soul and body. Xiangqun generalized that the essence of Confucian enlightenment and education is to emphasize people's quality [14]. And in Yeon, Jae-heum, Ahn, and Jae-ho's research, the interpretation of perfect personality was defined by Confucius and so did most of the morals that the Chinese often value [15]. If one is to study Chinese culture and its impact on fine arts, it seems again that Confucius is the key and is everything. You can find so much shadow of Confucianism in fine arts education, but the drawback is that Confucius said nothing directly about fine arts or fine arts education.

5. The Word Necessary to Dig: Aesthetics

5.1. The Origin of Aesthetics

In terms of the popular word "aesthetics", or the "aesthetic ability" as an education target, many academic works seemed to take it for granted as a common word of which all people were assumed to have an agreement in its interpretation. Within today's context, generally, all the writers, who suggest fine arts courses cultivate and improve students' aesthetic ability, were implying that aesthetic ability was a kind of ability to have better understanding of what is beauty or to identify beauty, to appreciate beauty or in some cases to create beauty. While historically, this word arose from David Hume's theory of beauty, outlined in an essay called "Of the Standard of Taste", and Kant's third critique—critique of aesthetic judgement. Briefly speaking, Hume stated that perceptions of beauty were outcomes of human minds rather than objects' own properties, which as a result, were subjective, meaning what was beautiful to someone would be not to another, no matter what quality of one's taste was, his or her judgement of beauty should be acquiesced in. Meanwhile, Hume mentioned it was meaningless to figure out a unified standard of beauty and taste and one needed not to regulate other people's sense of beauty [16]. For Kant, it was recognized that aesthetic judgments were based on an individual's subjective feelings, but besides, he claimed that aesthetic judgements were

universally applicable because they were disinterested. He made his claim persuasive, including detailed discrimination of aesthetic pleasure differing from other kinds of pleasures that came out of satisfaction to personal wants and needs. And it is inspiring when Kant defined aesthetic pleasure came from free operations or interactions between imagination and understanding of an object [17].

5.2. The Implications from the Pursuit for Aesthetics Ability

There are still many arguments about whether Hume asserted aesthetics as subjective or objective, and whether aesthetic judgments were disinterested or not, universal or not. Plus, it was also brought into analysis by some researchers that the concept of art evolves through time.

All the same, what we can draw from all these is that by comparison, Chinese fine arts teachers or academic writers seldom clarify what is aesthetics or aesthetic ability, and assume there was a standardized evaluation of beauty and students should reach that “qualified level” of taste through learning. But actually, Hume’s and Kant’s arguments are worth being referred to. For example, a person is free to accept personal taste or sense of beauty rather than being disturbed by others’ opinions; meanwhile, he or she had better not to regulate others’ standards of beauty. So one can be at ease in appreciating beauty in his or her own eyes. And the other ones need not be angry if somebody holds different tastes or attitudes. Besides, aesthetic pleasure may provide a remedy to human hearts when certain wants or needs cannot be met, or provide a new level of sentiment of joy besides other pleasures like physical pleasures. This gives lots of credits to fine arts education in terms of helping with achieving happiness if it does reach the goal of aesthetic cultivation.

Also, Kant’s idea of aesthetics’ universality is at least justified to an extent in the cases of many worldly-famous artworks. For mass audiences they are breathtaking through decades and beyond cultures’ boundaries or politics’ influence. In Chinese fine arts courses, teachers do have a syllabus covering appreciation classes. So at the same time, when allowing students to have personal tastes and judgements, it’s great that teachers have the aesthetics’ universality in mind to lead students to appreciate “universal beauties”. If any students don’t like the works or don’t regard them as beautiful, at least they can try sharing their feelings by looking at the merits and opening their minds to see the diversity of beauty. Then fine arts teachers should be equipped with the knowledge and abilities of humanities and thus have better understanding on a metacognitive level of all the artworks. It’s beneficial for them to go beyond the differences and boundaries of countries’ cultures, time, forms, disciplines or other kinds. Thus they can better guide and inspire students to appreciate certain works rather than informing simple introduction information or merely teaching painting skills. Note that humanities or humanistic education do not just include the discipline of psychology, as many researchers covered in their arguments on the necessity of integration of humanities and fine arts education.

6. Conclusion

In the work, many implications have been drawn. Through all the literature review, comparison, analysis and discussion, it can be seen that humanities education plays a very crucial role in cultivating one’s imagination, sympathy ability, critical thinking, creativity, innovation abilities, motivations for other courses, and other various merits for gaining happiness. If to reach these cultivating targets, humanities education is essential to be integrated in fine arts courses. For many fine arts courses in China, humanities education needs to be inspected again. So do the interpretations of aesthetics, which make quite a difference for one’s happiness. It’s better to have much broader perspectives and more comprehensive understandings. Thereby higher qualities will have the chance to be achieved in fine arts education, which will promote the realization of all the educational aims

previously set, meanwhile adding much more value. And most significantly, the accordingly modified fine arts education should provide better access to happiness.

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