

Comparison of the Selection Systems for Elite Art Talents in China and the UK: A Case Study on Art Entrance Examinations

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Abstract: This paper compares the selection systems for elite art talents in China and the UK, using art entrance examinations as a case study. The study explores the differences, underlying reasons, problems, and reflections on the two countries' selection systems, and proposes relatively detailed reform plans. The research concludes that while China's unified examination system is rigorous, it is overly rigid and fails to fully consider students' professional interests, potentially leading to the loss of promising talents. On the other hand, the UK's selection criteria, though flexible, are highly subjective and tend to overlook the training of basic skills, potentially favoring innovation at the expense of technical ability. It is suggested that both countries should learn from each other's strengths to further reform their systems. China could adopt the UK's A-Level system, gradually reform the unified examination into an elective system, and establish a national-level art recommendation letter system with endorsements from artists as core evaluators. Meanwhile, the UK could learn from China's nine-year compulsory education system by popularizing art education and emphasizing the cultivation of technical skills, with the reform of one technical skill subject into a compulsory examination subject.

Keywords: flexibility, auxiliary subjects, student development, resource allocation, technical skills.

1. Introduction

Provincial education authorities and admissions offices have been continuously reforming the art entrance examination system. With the changing landscape, how to promote fairness, improve efficiency, and further regulate and guide the healthy development of art major admissions exams referred to as “art exams”—while maintaining scientific and regular principles—has become a significant issue worthy of careful consideration and in-depth research. [1] Art education in higher institutions has become a focal point in today's society; however, there are numerous problems in the mechanism for selecting elite art talents. For example, in the controversial 2024 Liu Xingyu incident [2], a young art prodigy, highly regarded by nearly everyone, failed the unified exam, receiving a score far below his actual level. He was eventually admitted to the Repin Academy of Fine Arts in Russia, prompting a series of reflections. Through an examination of the traditional Chinese art examination system alongside a comprehensive understanding of the UK's talent selection framework,

significant differences emerge between China and the West in elite talent selection within education. For example, the UK's university assessment panel system and the incorporation of diverse media in AP exams offer alternative methods of evaluation. Nevertheless, challenges remain within AP and A-Level exams, such as the excessive focus on A-Level results, which may cause students to undervalue the learning process, and the diminishing emphasis on traditional painting techniques, potentially hindering the development of elite talent. A thorough analysis suggests that the primary goal of higher education extends beyond enhancing the overall quality of the population to the more critical task of identifying and nurturing exceptional elite talent. China, being a populous country with scarce resources, requires students to achieve their dreams through intense competition. As a result, the talent selection system in China focuses more on the competition of comprehensive abilities. A comprehensive ability assessment means that when students take exams, they must achieve high scores in all subjects within the required scope, with the final total score becoming the measure. If a student performs poorly in one subject, it will affect the total score, leading to a loss of admission opportunities. Often, potential elite talents excel in specific areas, so this comprehensive selection system greatly reduces their chances of entering universities. China does not lack talent, but it lacks elite talents. This research aims to reform the existing talent selection system through comparative education to create more opportunities for elite talents to gain admission. A comprehensive evaluation system cannot serve as the sole standard for assessing all talents; it is unfair to students with exceptional skills in one area. This unfairness forces students to abandon their specialties to meet university score requirements, resulting in the unfortunate diversion of talent. An examination of the UK's admission system reinforces the importance of mutual learning and exchange between different educational frameworks. Systems exist to serve people, and different national conditions lead to different systems. Therefore, how to improve the elite talent selection system based on China's national conditions is a crucial question. This research centers on the selection of elite art talents as a case study to examine the specific differences between China and the UK in their elite talent selection systems, the underlying factors contributing to these differences, and the challenges within each system. Additionally, it explores the policy insights both China and the West can draw from each other to reform these systems and the strategies for effectively implementing such reforms.

2. Literature Review

The issues explored in this study are addressed in three categories of literature. Although none of these studies directly focus on the specific research topic of this paper, they offer valuable insights into various aspects relevant to the research. The first category primarily focuses on identifying the problems within the policy framework for selecting elite art talents in China and offers macro-level reform suggestions. As China's higher education rapidly shifts from an elite model to mass education, significant changes are expected in the internal structure, training objectives, and teaching systems of university-level art programs. It has been suggested that a modern education examination system with Chinese characteristics should be established, one that combines a unified national examination-based admission process with diversified exams and multiple selection methods, emphasizes high self-discipline among universities, strengthens macro-management by the government, and ensures effective social supervision [3]. However, the specific details of these reform plans still require further exploration. This category of literature also investigates the reasons behind the issues in the art talent selection system. In China, the college entrance examination requirements for applicants to art schools are lower than those for regular candidates. This has led to the growth of a profitable industry—private art exam preparatory schools. In terms of art media and genres, realistic sketching and painting are the only forms taught in these preparatory schools. This literature reflects the reasons, from a student's perspective, why China's art education system produces more designers than artists. The second category of literature primarily examines the differences in art education philosophies

between China and the West, as well as the differences in the methods and objectives of student training after they enter university. In China, art education is often regarded as an important auxiliary tool for moral education, without a mandatory requirement to use art education to cultivate sentiments or enhance personal refinement. In recent years, art education has become a crucial component of promoting socialist spiritual civilization. In contrast, Western countries have never treated art education as an auxiliary or supplementary form of education, nor have they made it serve political purposes [4]. This clearly points out the reasons for the differences in art education philosophies between China and the West, and highlights the significant differences in curriculum design for students after they enter university.

From the perspective of course themes, the elective courses within the self-development course module still fall under the broader category of fine arts and do not exhibit significant cross-disciplinary or cross-specialization characteristics [5]. This reflects the differences in curriculum design between Chinese and British art education. Building on this discussion, the third category of literature examines the shortcomings of Western higher art education and the issues within its talent selection system. According to research, the problems observed in Western systems are in contrast to those in China. In the UK, painting skills are perceived to be gradually declining, and the traditional concept of skills is being questioned. Higher education lecturers believe that introductory-level painting skills are either stagnating or deteriorating. The time allocated to painting in undergraduate courses has decreased, even less than what they experienced during their own undergraduate education. The increase in digital content and the overall reduction in contact time are notable factors. In the UK, students are allowed to use various materials and methods when creating their application portfolios, which has led to a lack of emphasis on developing technical skills. In contrast, China places excessive importance on traditional painting skills, which in turn stifles students' creativity. There are also clear differences in the evaluation of admission portfolios between the two countries. According to Monika Kackovic's article, RABK is an internationally renowned and prestigious postgraduate visual arts program based in the Netherlands. The RABK admission process is divided into two rounds: pre-selection and final selection. In the pre-selection stage, applicants are invited for an interview, and the final selection is based on the interview results. The review of admission portfolios requires significant financial support; however, the relatively expensive selection process tends to inspire greater restraint and may result in only higher-quality applicants applying. This type of research highlights the pros and cons of the Western higher education selection system but does not involve comparative education. While we acknowledge the contributions and relevance of the above materials to this study, there is a clear knowledge gap. The first category of literature identifies issues within China's elite art talent selection system and provides general reform suggestions but does not focus on specific reform plans or discuss the details of elite talent selection. The second category of literature focuses on comparing the differences in art education philosophies and the objectives and course content of university education in China and the West but does not address the differences in philosophies regarding elite talent selection or the institutional issues in nurturing elite talents in universities. The third category of literature discusses the problems in Western art education but does not use a comparative approach to discuss how the Western elite talent selection system can be improved in relation to China's art education system.

3. Research Methodology

Survey research and case comparison methods were utilized to analyze textual data. The primary data sources for this research consist of interview information from teachers and students, along with real-life case studies. Therefore, survey research and case comparison are the most appropriate methodologies.

3.1. Specific Research Methods

This study takes the selection system for elite art talents as an example. First, it analyzes the differences in the selection systems between China and the UK, as well as the underlying reasons for these differences, from the perspectives of students and teachers. Cases from both countries were identified for data analysis, drawing on interviews with students who have experienced both selection systems and teachers who have taught within them. From the perspectives of students and teachers, Table 1 presents the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the art selection systems in China and the UK. Table 2 outlines the pros and cons of the Chinese and British art talent selection systems, specifically in terms of their emphasis on technical skills and creativity.

Next, specific reports and literature were utilized to examine and discuss the issues present in the elite talent selection systems of both China and the West. The argumentation process will be presented in the form of literature. This part of the data will help me proceed with the comparative research. A detailed plan will be provided to explore how China and the West can learn from each other's policy experiences to reform their talent selection systems, along with the recommended approaches for implementing these reforms.

3.2. Specific Interview Subjects

The interview subjects in this study are divided into two main groups: students and teachers. The study aims to explore relevant issues from both perspectives and ultimately provide insights from prominent Chinese scholars. First, suitable students were selected—those with experience in both national college entrance examinations and school-specific assessments, who are familiar with the application process for higher education institutions in the UK and have been involved in the process. These students graduated from top comprehensive and art institutions in China and are currently pursuing postgraduate studies at prestigious art schools in the UK. Second, appropriate teachers were selected for interviews—those with experience teaching national college entrance exam courses and UK application courses. Finally, insights were gathered from prominent Chinese scholars.

4. Research Findings

Interviews with students and teachers have yielded the following answers to the research questions:

4.1. What Are the Specific Differences between the Elite Talent Selection Systems in China and the UK, and what Are the Underlying Reasons for These Differences?

From analyzing the responses of students and teachers, it is evident that the differences between the Chinese and British systems and their assessment criteria can be categorized into two main areas: the differences in the assessment systems and the differences in the focus of the assessments.

4.1.1. Differences in Assessment Systems

China's joint examination provides a nationwide standardized assessment, covering subjects such as sketching, quick sketching, and color, with a uniform examination time of 180 minutes across the country. In contrast, the UK's A-level (ALEVE) assessment is more flexible, involving a comprehensive evaluation through a portfolio, personal statement, and an in-person assessment. The in-person assessment allows for the use of mixed media, with a supervised creation process lasting 15 hours, and includes an interview component.

4.1.2. Differences in Focus of Assessments

China places a strong emphasis on foundational technical skills, whereas the UK prioritizes students' logical thinking, research, and practical abilities, with a greater focus on professional art skills. In the UK, academic performance in general subjects serves as a supplementary reference rather than a primary criterion. The UK emphasizes professional competency and avoids increasing the difficulty of assessments by raising academic standards. Additionally, the UK highlights the importance of the recommendation letter system, which helps identify more outstanding talents. The use of a jury system assists the nation in selecting students with artistic discernment and innovative capabilities. They believe that technical skills can be further developed at the university level. According to sources, from 1994 to 1998, Western jury panels were composed of evaluators specializing in two-dimensional artworks (e.g., painting, drawing, photography, graphic design) and another group focusing on three-dimensional artworks (e.g., sculpture, installation art), including film and video art. However, from 1999 until the end of the observation period, the jury was composed of two multidisciplinary panels, each consisting of four to five internationally renowned artists [6]. This selection process results in higher-quality talents with a certain level of cross-disciplinary skills. On the other hand, China's joint examination system helps the nation select students with a solid foundation in art and drawing, highlighting a clear difference in the assessment standards between the two systems.

4.2. The Specific Reasons for These Differences Can Be Primarily Categorized into Differences in National Conditions, Flexibility, and Concepts of Art Talent Cultivation

4.2.1. National Conditions

Due to China's large population, the joint examination system ensures fairness and rational management for the majority of students. The joint examination can only be managed rationally through standardized scoring methods. In contrast, the UK considers art as part of higher education, and typically only children from wealthy families can access art education, which leads to an unequal distribution of art education resources.

4.2.2. Flexibility

Students interviewed indicated that the subjects assessed by China's joint examination are too limited. If the joint examination does not increase its flexibility, it will be very detrimental to the country's ability to select and nurture potential elite talents. Furthermore, both teachers and students noted that the joint examination subjects cannot fully assess the foundational skills of all art students, such as interactive design and architectural design. Students who do not pass the joint examination often struggle to gain admission to specialized art schools, which hinders the country's talent development. Teachers noted that the success of the UK system relies on a well-established trust system and refined management. This allows for an exploration of the core issues students are focused on through their portfolios and understanding the emphasis of their concerns, whether it is on the humanities and social sciences or on design and the future. This flexibility helps teachers place students in suitable institutions for development, showcasing the advantage of flexibility.

4.2.3. Concept of Art Talent Cultivation

Teachers interviewed pointed out that in China, art education is still considered a subordinate discipline and is seen as an auxiliary means. The country does not pay enough attention to cultivating art talents and focuses more on selection rather than development. This results in students who pass

the selection process receiving appropriate training, but an exclusive focus on basic technical skills does not allow for the reasonable selection of art talents. According to the data, compared to art education in Europe and the United States, art education in China is still regarded as a supplementary and auxiliary tool rather than an independent and substantive discipline. In the educational system, it occupies a subordinate position. In contrast, citizens in Western countries generally do not view art education as having a moral education function but rather connect it to personal cultivation and thought. In the West, art is considered as important as subjects like mathematics and physics, and many art associations are established in different countries to help cultivate art talents.

4.3. What Are the Problems with the Elite Talent Selection Systems in China and the West?

Through the analysis of interviews with students and teachers, the main issues with the systems in both China and the UK focus on student development and assessment flaws.

4.3.1. Student Development

Both students and teachers agree that the joint examination system in China does not help students explore the professions they wish to pursue in the future. This limits their professional development in university, with the impact ranging from 5% to 20%. Additionally, the strict regulations of the joint examination vary by region, forcing students to compromise for the sake of admission, which hinders the development of their personal style. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between university courses and majors. Comprehensive universities require courses in drawing and color, but these subjects have no direct relevance to students' chosen fields, making it difficult to support advanced study.

Students also indicated that joint examination scores determine eligibility for university-specific examinations, which often rely on drawing, color, and sketching, thus failing to select truly specialized talents. This leads to issues with choosing and changing majors. The college entrance examination (高考) relies on the total scores from cultural and professional subjects, which may lead students to enter unsuitable majors and then seek to switch majors. However, changing majors requires high scores in the current major as well as tests in computer science and English, limiting opportunities and not addressing the students' future professional development needs. According to interview data, both students and teachers consistently believe that the joint examination system causes deeper educational problems. In contrast, in the UK, the imbalance of art resources limits the country's ability to discover potential talent, as the course selection system and economic issues prevent students from accessing appropriate educational resources.

4.3.2. Systemic Flaws

According to interviews with students and teachers, the purpose of the joint examination system is to help the country select students with a solid foundation in art. However, with the development of rationalized assessment standards, many students without a strong art background are now using memorized templates to participate in the exams, which severely undermines the purpose of the joint examination system. Additionally, the trend towards flexibility has led to the loss of cross-disciplinary talents. This issue exists not only in the selection system but also within university teaching, where students in different majors are almost completely isolated from one another, with little collaboration or communication. Furthermore, teachers have expressed that the UK's application system is highly subjective, lacking rationalized technical assessments, which results in students being deficient in traditional drawing skills. According to Western sources, art and design higher education lecturers have observed a gradual decline in high school graduates' drawing skills over the past 20 years. Despite the continued emphasis on drawing skills, the amount of contact time devoted to collective drawing instruction in undergraduate programs has decreased, and schools no longer require drawing

as part of the curriculum. Traditionally, the practice of drawing through FAD (Fine Art Department) is being “eroded” [7]. The lack of technical assessment in the UK’s admissions system has left many students unfamiliar with traditional drawing techniques, which is detrimental to the selection of elite talents. Moreover, the excessive focus on A-Level scores has led to a significant resistance among students to learning drawing techniques. Lecturers have expressed concerns about students’ increasing reluctance to engage in the ambiguous middle stages of the design process, noting growing pressure and strict achievement targets. One teacher described failing the A-Level exam as “unacceptable” at their school. Lecturers believe that using a focus on creativity as an excuse to overlook the lack of technical training is detrimental to developing outstanding elite talents in the UK. Furthermore, teachers noted that while art education is part of higher education in the UK, only affluent families can support their children in studying art. According to The Guardian’s report, “The View on Art Education: The Creativity Crisis,” the government’s educational policies are too utilitarian and may confine art education to a privileged few, with hopes for national changes to allow more children to learn art. [8]

Table 1 shows the advantages and disadvantages of the art selection systems in China and the UK as perceived by students and teachers:

Table 1: The pros and cons of selecting top talents in China and the UK from the perspective of teachers and mentors.

		Joint examination (Chinese Art College Entrance Examination)	ALEVE (UK Art College Entrance Examination)
Advantages	Students	Students receive solid foundational skills training. Nationwide implementation ensures every child has an assessment opportunity. The assessment scores can be accurately predicted.	The assessment content is highly flexible. It is conducive to exploring one's own specialties. It greatly benefits undergraduate studies. It enhances students' logical thinking and research practical skills. The recommendation letter system helps the country discover more high-quality talent.
	Teachers	Students receive solid foundational skills training. Nationwide implementation ensures every child has an assessment opportunity. The assessment scores can be accurately predicted. Unified question setting and scoring make management easier.	The assessment content is highly flexible. It is conducive to students exploring their own specialties. It greatly benefits undergraduate studies. It enhances students' logical thinking and research practical skills. It is beneficial for discovering interdisciplinary talent. The recommendation letter system helps the country discover more potential talent.
Disadvantages	Students	The exam content is too rigid.	It is expensive, not all students have the opportunity to study art.

Table 1: (continued).

		It discourages students' creativity. It provides little assistance for undergraduate studies. It cannot help students determine their professional development direction. It is unfavorable for the development of students with specialized talents.	The assessment criteria are too broad, making it difficult to predict scores. It lacks strict requirements for technical skills.
	Teachers	The exam content is too rigid. It discourages students' creativity. It lacks refined management. It cannot help students determine their professional development direction. It is unfavorable for the development of students with specialized talents.	It is expensive, not all students have the opportunity to study art. The assessment criteria are too broad, making it difficult to predict scores. It lacks strict requirements for technical skills. There is an excessive emphasis on subjective assessment, lacking strong rational evaluation.

The analysis indicates that China focuses more on technical skill training, while the West emphasizes creativity.

Table 2 shows the advantages and disadvantages of the art talent selection systems in China and the UK, focusing on technical skills and creativity:

Table 2: The pros and cons of emphasizing technique and creativity in the selection of top talents in China and the UK from the perspective of teachers and teachers.

		Joint examination (Chinese Art College Entrance Examination)	ALEVE (UK Art College Entrance Examination)
Advantages	Students	Students receive solid foundational skills training. Students develop strong copying abilities.	It encourages the development of exploratory and innovative spirit in students. Practical skills are cultivated. Interdisciplinary abilities are enhanced. Students' communication skills are improved.

Table 2: (continued).

	Teachers	Students receive solid foundational skills training. Students develop strong copying abilities. It helps students integrate basic art skills into their art studies.	It encourages the development of exploratory and innovative spirit in students. Practical skills are cultivated. Interdisciplinary abilities are enhanced. Students' communication skills are improved. It helps foster students' independence.
Disadvantages	Students	Lack of practical skills training. Lack of interdisciplinary skills training. Lack of innovation thinking training.	Lack of technical skills training.
	Teachers	Lack of practical skills training. Lack of interdisciplinary skills training. Lack of innovation thinking training. It is not conducive to developing students' critical thinking skills.	Lack of technical skills training.

4.4. What Policy Experiences Should China and the West Learn from Each Other to Reform Their Systems, and what Reform Measures Should Be Taken?

Based on the above analysis, the reform direction for China can be divided into three main areas: increasing flexibility in learning, expanding and optimizing subject areas, and introducing special admission and recommendation letter systems. China should learn from the flexibility of the UK's assessment system by gradually transforming the national college entrance exam into a course selection system. While retaining assessments in drawing and color, the third subject should be turned into an elective, allowing students to focus on their strengths and undergo training and assessment accordingly, with the third subject being assessed through independent topics. The exam subjects should be expanded to include design assessments and reduce the emphasis on drawing and color, focusing more on professional assessments to enhance the precision of selecting specialized talents. Extended training time could further refine students' professional development, increasing the exam's relevance to their university studies and addressing talent streamlining issues. Introducing a special admission system for art through awards or works, providing institutional recommendation letters, and converting them into academic scores could attract more art talent. Additionally, employing artists as core members of the evaluation panel would be beneficial, but this suggestion would be more effective once precise management practices in China have matured.

Regarding the major transfer system, the national college entrance exam does not help students clarify their future professional direction. Many university students find themselves unsuited to their current major after entering university and wish to transfer. However, China's art college entrance

exam allocates majors based on the total scores of cultural and professional subjects, leading to many students being unable to enter their desired major and resulting in talent streamlining. The current transfer system requires students to excel in their original major and pass computer and English level exams, limiting their choices. It is suggested that transfer assessments should be based on the requirements of the new major and employ a percentage-based quota system to better support student development and the cultivation of top national talent.

For the UK, the reform directions should include strengthening technical training and establishing compulsory subjects. The UK needs to learn from China's nine-year compulsory education system by integrating art into various colleges and enhancing technical training to address the lack of traditional techniques in Western art education. Basic technical courses should be established as compulsory subjects to better assess students' foundational skills.

Finally, interviews were conducted with several distinguished scholars and artists from China:

Artist 1 stated that art education should be tailored to individual needs to develop students' practical abilities. Art creation requires extensive research and meticulous logical thinking. Current art selection exams lack flexibility, causing the loss of many talents. Education is a lifelong endeavor, not limited to a specific stage, and persistence is key. Teacher Kang suggested that China's art talent selection system could adopt the Western recommendation letter system to discover more potential talents.

Artist 2 emphasized that art is universal and requires mutual learning and progress. They hope that in the future, China can develop a more comprehensive art selection system to discover more art talents for the country.

Scholar 3 noted that China's education is continuously evolving in a step-by-step process, and believes that more outstanding talents will emerge from China's education system in the near future.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Rules are dead but people are alive. — China

Policy is a living paper. — West

China employs a nationally unified joint examination system that primarily assesses foundational techniques such as sketching, quick drawing, and color, with a strong emphasis on standardization but limited flexibility. This system restricts students' professional choices and development opportunities, focusing heavily on technical skills while neglecting creativity and interdisciplinary abilities. In contrast, the UK uses a comprehensive assessment approach through portfolios, personal statements, and in-person evaluations, emphasizing students' creativity, logical thinking, and interdisciplinary skills. While the assessment standards are flexible, the lack of rigorous evaluation of traditional techniques results in weaker foundational drawing skills among students. China's joint examination system is overly rigid, lacking exploration and cultivation of students' future professional interests, and relies excessively on foundational techniques, which may lead to a loss of professionals suited to their fields. The UK's selection standards are highly subjective, with insufficient emphasis on traditional techniques, causing some students to be deficient in foundational drawing skills. This results in selection outcomes that may favor innovation over technical ability. China should learn from the UK's flexibility by gradually transitioning the joint examination to a course selection system, incorporating professional subjects such as design, and reducing the emphasis on foundational technique assessments. The introduction of a recommendation letter system and special recruitment mechanisms could help identify more potential top talents. The UK should enhance foundational technical training, integrate art education into compulsory education systems, establish compulsory technical subjects, and balance the assessment of creativity and technical skills to address the current shortcomings in technical training.

This research employed comparative education methods to examine the differences and underlying reasons in the selection systems for top talents between China and the West, addressing key issues, reflections, and offering detailed reform plans. The study's limitations include a limited number of interview subjects, subjective viewpoints, and a lack of higher-level research practice data.

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