A Study of Art Education at the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School

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Abstract
The Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School was China's earliest correspondence art school, founded in the second year of the Xuantong era and operating for over twenty years. Renowned art educator Zhou Xiang established this school, offering a diverse range of painting courses. Chinese painting courses emphasized innovation within traditional techniques, while Western painting courses utilized both copying and life-drawing methods. The school's teaching model primarily revolved around correspondence courses, complemented by on-site classes. This approach challenged the traditional Chinese master-apprentice teaching system and expedited the modernization of art education. The school emphasized the parallel development of aesthetic and moral education, imparting painting skills and nurturing specialized talents. It not only produced a pool of exceptional art talents for Shanghai, thereby advancing the development of art education in the city, but also promoted the popularization of aesthetic education through public welfare initiatives. Its innovative practices and concepts have had a profound and far-reaching impact on Chinese art education.

Keywords
Chinese and Western painting correspondence school, Art education, Educational concept, Influence

1. Introduction
The Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School was established on the first day of July in the second year of the Xuantong Emperor (1910), making it the earliest private art correspondence school founded in China. Its founder, Zhou Xiang (1871-1933), also known by his literary names Yinhou, Yinan, and Guanyuan Laosou, was a pioneer in early Chinese art education. A versatile individual, he was skilled in calligraphy and painting and had a keen interest in poetry and seal engraving. He was an avid traveler who enjoyed exploring mountains and rivers. After the failed Hundred Days' Reform, he journeyed to Japan and subsequently toured various European countries, where he gleaned insights from numerous Western artists. He initially studied in France and later continued his education in Belgium, Switzerland, and other countries, developing a profound understanding of Western painting.

Upon returning to China due to familial circumstances, Zhou was employed by a publishing house and contributed illustrations and satirical cartoons to the "Enlightenment Patriot's Pictorial" and other publications (Zhou Yuxun, 2021). Around the time of the Xinhai Revolution, with the surge of new education in Shanghai, Zhou applied his knowledge of Western painting techniques to teach and establish specialized art schools. In total, he established over a dozen schools, among which the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School stands out as the earliest and longest-running. Initially located outside the Ximen Gate in the French Concession at Jiale Road Shunyuanli, Shanghai, for its convenient access, the school moved in March 1911 to a newly built Western-style house in Ba'ani, near Baxian Bridge and the local police station. In the fall of 1913, the enrollment office was relocated to Chujia...
Bridge in the French Concession, and in 1920, it moved to Datiehan in the French Concession. By 1928, the address advertised for enrollment was at the intersection of Aiwenyi Road and Xiaoshadu Road in Shanghai. The school’s numerous relocations, while continuing operations, not only demonstrate Zhou Xiang’s unwavering commitment to art education but also reflect the adaptability of its curriculum to the demands of the times.

2. Teaching Content and Methods

The name of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School clearly indicates that its curriculum encompasses both Chinese and Western painting. In Chinese painting, subjects are subdivided into figures combined with beauties, and flowers and plants combined with birds and insects. The Western painting category includes pencil sketches, Western-style portraits, Western-style color painting, and oil painting, with Western-style portraits consisting of sketches, watercolors, and oil portraits. The course offerings were diverse and targeted, sketching a rough outline of what would be expected in a modern art school curriculum. Zhou Xiang, skilled in both Chinese and Western painting styles, was well-versed in various techniques and demonstrated exceptional painting abilities. He emphasized the importance of copying masterworks, believing that meticulous replication was the key to significantly enhancing one's painting skills. The textbooks and manuals for each subject were also written by Zhou Xiang. According to recollections from his student Yang Qingqing, he once observed several of Zhou Xiang’s landscape paintings and detailed tutorials on color layering in the study of a fellow student, Shen Yicha, and was deeply impressed by Zhou’s high level of skill in painting. After studying under Zhou Xiang, Yang’s interest in painting grew substantially. Zhou (1932) argued that aspiring painters should seek instruction from renowned masters rather than trying to be entirely self-taught, asserting that to innovate, one must first master the traditional methods. He emphasized that the study of Chinese painting should “seek to innovate through reviving the old,” building on a foundation of traditional methods that typically began with copying excellent works, the importance of which cannot be overstated. Zhou authored textbooks like "Methods of Oil Painting" and "Methods of Watercolor Painting", providing high-quality templates that were superior to those available elsewhere, thus significantly enhancing the learning outcomes for his students.

Reflecting on the late Qing and early Republican periods, two distinct Western art teaching methods emerged in modern Chinese art education: the "copying from examples" method and the "life drawing" method. The former emphasized utility and knowledge, while the latter prioritized scientific observation and aesthetic appreciation (Li Chao, 2004). The Western art instruction at the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School encompassed both these methods. The "drawing from copies" method involved copying artworks to clearly communicate step-by-step techniques and coloring skills, allowing students to practice repeatedly. According to student Chen Baoyi, there was no clear theoretical understanding of Western painting at the time, so learning Western painting began with copying, just like Chinese painting. The "life drawing" method, on the other hand, emphasized realism and detailed observation to achieve truthful representation. Zhou Xiang (1920) proposed in his teachings on background painting that artworks should be executed with boldness and freedom, avoiding trivialities to capture the essence of nature. He emphasized the importance of depicting light, shadow, distance, and perspective principles in portraying elements such as mountains, forests, and trees, suggesting that distant views should appear lighter. This reflects Zhou Xiang’s requirements for Western-style painting, which involve the artist's judgment and selection of objects and the incorporation of Western techniques to achieve a unique aesthetic appeal. In Western painting instruction, the concurrent practices of copying artworks and sketching from real-life objects reflect the intricate journey of Western painting’s introduction, dissemination, and integration in China.

Beyond introductory painting classes, the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School also accommodated students with basic skills seeking advanced studies, offering customized courses tailored to their interests and abilities. In addition to the Chinese and Western painting courses, there are also innovative courses such as calligraphy, sculpture, pastel, and charcoal drawing (Ding Jianxing, 1944). Interested students could enroll in relevant courses without restrictions on gender or foundational skills in painting; the only requirement was the ability to write letters in Chinese. The school conducted enrollment twice a year, in spring and autumn, with a one-year study period culminating in a diploma. Tuition fees were economical at 18 yuan per semester, including lecture notes and postage, payable in full at registration. In regions where postal remittance was not available, payments could be made using stamps at a discount of 10%.

3. Teaching Model

The Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School pioneered the use of correspondence methods for art
instruction in China, as emphasized in its 1917 recruitment advertisement: "The method of correspondence education in our country originated from this school and has proven uniquely effective." Embracing the international model of correspondence education, the school taught both Chinese and Western painting, asserting that the study of art lends itself well to the correspondence format and can be mastered with ease. Just as stated in the first clause of the 1910 enrollment regulations, the school allowed students from all over the country who wanted to study painting to receive education without leaving their homes, without affecting their original professions. Local students received textbooks, lectures, and manuals delivered every three days, while students from other areas received their materials via post. After receiving the materials, students were expected to study according to the instructions, and if they had any questions, they could correspond with the school for clarification. Completed assignments and questions were mailed back for correction. Each student was expected to copy about one piece per week, totaling around 20 pieces per session. Generally, students would complete one term of correspondence and not continue further (Wang Zhen, 2002). The school implemented specific regulations for students who dropped out or suspended their studies. No refunds were provided for students who dropped out mid-way, and if a student failed to respond to three letters from the school without providing a valid reason, their correspondence course was terminated. In February 1916, the school redefined its regulations: local students could pick up their materials directly, while students from other locations would have them mailed, only needing to pay two to three fen for postage. When the school's inaugural student, Ding Song, commenced studies under Zhou Xiang, there were merely three other peers, all instructed correspondence. According to another student, Ding Jianxing (1944), as the student body grew, beyond correspondence, some also resided and received instruction directly at the school. During concentrated teaching sessions, Zhou Xiang would demonstrate Western painting techniques live, guiding students in copying and making corrections. This hands-on approach supplemented the school's primary correspondence teaching method.

Against the backdrop of social upheaval, the school's adoption of correspondence teaching had many advantages at the time. Firstly, it removed geographical, age, and gender barriers, providing an opportunity for anyone interested in learning painting to do so without the need for long-distance travel. Secondly, the focused and practical setup of professional courses allowed students to choose subjects of interest, fostering a passion for painting and enabling them to quickly master skills without impacting their primary occupations. Thirdly, the one-to-one communication between teachers and students through letters allowed for tailored guidance and effective problem-solving, significantly enhancing painting skills. Fourthly, for the school, correspondence teaching saved costs on facilities and equipment. Although the school moved locations several times, its recruitment and teaching were minimally affected, thanks to the correspondence method. However, this method also had limitations; students only saw the finished paintings and explanations from teachers, missing out on the direct experience of the painting process, and had to rely on self-study to understand brushwork and force, which could lead to superficial imitation. Regardless, correspondence painting education represented a significant breakthrough from the traditional apprentice system in China, with the establishment of both Chinese and Western painting disciplines and the operation of private schools serving as effective explorations. As an early venture into modern education, despite its limitations, it held considerable significance in the educational landscape of its time.

4. Art Education Concept

During the Republican era, amidst the fervor of new ideas and ideologies, different academic ideologies and schools engaged in prolonged scholarly debates, which subsequently became the guiding ideologies for art education. Academic factions represented by figures like Cai Yuanpei advocated for "using aesthetic education instead of religion," believing in the universality, freedom, and lack of restriction in aesthetic education. They viewed aesthetic education as a symbol of freedom and progress and as a means of self-liberation, paving the way for the flourishing of modern Chinese art education and laying the groundwork for educational ideology (Pan Yaochang, 2002). In the practice of aesthetic education, the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School gradually developed its unique aesthetic education concept.

4.1 Parallel Pursuit of Aesthetic and Moral Education

At the onset of the 20th century, when China began implementing modern education, it promoted moral, intellectual, and physical education. In a narrow sense, moral education refers to the character education received in schools, where educators purposefully nurture students to develop positive and virtuous qualities. In 1912, after Cai Yuanpei was appointed as the Minister of Education for the Nanjing government, he announced the educational purpose,
advocating for "Educating Five Domains Simultaneously". He pointed out that while emphasizing moral education, aesthetic education was instrumental in promoting moral cultivation (Cai Yuanpei, 1912). Aesthetic education applies theories of aesthetics to education with the aim of nurturing emotions. The goal of education is to cultivate appropriate behavior among the masses, with moral education at its core. This concept had a widespread influence at the time. In a letter to Zhou Xiang in 1918, Cai Yuanpei explicitly stated, "The development of fine arts greatly aids in the progress of civic virtue," affirming Zhou Xiang’s establishment of the school (Ma Lin, 2006). Zhou Xiang believed that those who study art should prioritize their character first, as only individuals with high moral integrity can produce high-quality artwork. If a person harbors base qualities, it is impossible for them to produce works of excellence from their hands or brushes. This holds true not only in the study of Chinese painting but also in Western painting. Zhou often instructed his students that truthfulness in sketching must be accompanied by moral integrity, and diligence is essential in both ethics and artistic pursuit. These principles demonstrate Zhou Xiang’s emphasis on both moral and artistic education, where character and artistic skill complement each other. Only individuals with both talent and moral integrity can create superior work. The 1917 recruitment announcement for the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School stated, "Correspondence teaching is premised on morality", indicating that the school not only focused on imparting artistic skills but also consistently integrated moral education, cultivating virtuous artistic qualities among students. The relationship between art and moral education complemented each other, enabling students to appreciate, discover, and create beauty through art, while moral education nurtured their emotions, established moral beliefs, and developed character, ensuring a well-rounded education.

4.2 Imparting Skills and Cultivating Specialists

Chinese newly established schools imitated the Japanese model in art education, especially in arts and crafts schools, where drawing and handicrafts were considered practical subjects aimed at cultivating practical talents to meet modern production needs. Cai Yuanpei (1912) put forward opinions on new education, advocating for pragmatic education, with people's livelihoods as the backbone of general education. At that time, China's industrial organization was immature, and there were many unemployed people, so pragmatic education was an urgent need. Under the guidance of industrial salvation, industries related to painting were highly regarded, but there was a lack of artistic talent in society. After returning to China, Zhou Xiang served as an editor for the "Qimin Patriotism Illustrated" and produced numerous works related to society, government, and education. He realized the importance of establishing schools to conduct education and the significance of art education in imparting practical skills, striving towards the direction of "establishing a comprehensive art school". The schools Zhou Xiang founded, such as the Shanghai Oil Painting Academy, Background Painting Institute, and the Zhonghua Art School, clearly targeted the needs of society's industrial sectors. In the early days of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School, Shanghai was considered an "art desert", and the general public and youth had little understanding of art, unaware of the career prospects for artists or that one could make a living through painting, resulting in low initial student enrollment (Wang Zhen, 2002). The 1917 recruitment information for the school noted that “The school's correspondence courses are the best in China, promoting vocational education”. In 1921, the school added various practical subjects to teach skills and train specialists. Among the known graduates of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School, many became school teachers, book and periodical editors, or illustrators for articles. For example, Wang Shizhi, after studying in Japan, taught traditional Chinese painting at multiple schools; Ding Song served as a professor at several institutions, including Mei Zhuan and Tongji, and also worked as an illustrator for periodicals; Yang Qingqing founded the Tianma Society to promote new art and established the "Humorous" cartoon monthly. Although the school's program was relatively short, it had a positive impact on students' educational and career trajectories in a practical way.

5. The Impact of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School

In the early 20th century, numerous Chinese students who had studied abroad in Japan, Europe, and America returned home to establish new educational institutions, thereby disseminating Western art and intellectual trends. This transition signified a shift in Chinese art from a traditionally insular era to one characterized by diverse and integrated influences. Through the founding of multiple private art schools over more than two decades, Zhou Xiang influenced thousands of individuals, leaving a significant mark on the history of early art education.

5.1 Advancing the Development of Art Education in Shanghai

According to contemporary scholar Hu Guanghua (1999), "Zhou Xiang, upon his return from France, dramatically transformed modern Chinese art education through his entrepreneurial spirit, kickstarting the trend of private art
education”. Zhou Xiang emerged as a pioneer, founding private art schools marked by their professional teaching and administration. This notably advanced early art education in Shanghai, particularly the propagation of Western painting, thus expediting the spread of Western arts and concepts in the East. Among his institutions, the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School was celebrated for its exceptional teaching methods. It was distinguished as the first to implement art correspondence teaching, offering lessons in both Chinese and Western painting, thereby broadly disseminating art knowledge. The school’s explorations and practices in art education set precedence in their time.

The Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School not only nurtured numerous talented artists but also spearheaded a new trend in the establishment of private art schools in Shanghai, propelled by Zhou Xiang’s earlier educational initiatives. According to incomplete statistics, there were 31 such schools nationwide at the time, with Shanghai alone boasting 14, significantly elevating the social status of private art institutions throughout the country (Ma Lin, 2006). In the second year following the establishment of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School, the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts was founded (Ma Jing, 2023), later evolving into the renowned Shanghai Fine Arts College, founded by Zhou Xiang’s student Liu Haisu. In its nascent years, the college closely replicated Zhou Xiang’s private art school in terms of teaching content, methods, and models. This foundation enabled Liu Haisu to build a strong reputation, elevate his status, and achieve a significant leap in his personal development within just a few years (Song Jinming, 2024). The Shanghai Fine Arts College eventually became one of the most influential institutions in the history of Chinese art education, and its success was inseparable from the foundation laid by the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School.

5.2 Parallel Public Welfare Strategies Aid in the Popularization of Art Education

Some scholars argue that Zhou Xiang’s establishment of schools was solely driven by commercial and livelihood considerations, lacking lofty goals and theoretical contributions, and therefore failing to influence the trends of the time (Pan Yaochang, 2002). However, this view is not correct. Considering the social context of the era, characterized by the emergence of modern commercial art and the growing demand for artistic talents, the focus on nurturing practical art skills was actually in line with the prevailing trends. In the development of a market economy, advancing modern art education from a practical perspective is indeed an important direction (Cao Yang, 2020). Moreover, during the years of enrollment at the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School, the school repeatedly emphasized low tuition fees and provided benefits for students. For instance, in the autumn of 1915, to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the school’s founding, hundreds of free spots were added for students. In the autumn of 1918, students were gifted watercolor paintings worth 16 yuan, all hand-painted by contemporary celebrities, not prints, with a limit of one hundred. For those passionate about painting, receiving a manuscript from a renowned artist was highly attractive. In later 1919, to celebrate the school’s tenth anniversary, tuition fees were halved for all students, new and old alike. In 1928, to commemorate the twentieth anniversary, tuition was halved, and students received a fan painted by Principal Zhou Xiang. Additionally, other schools founded by Zhou Xiang also offered financial incentives. At the Shanghai Oil Painting Academy, for example, undergraduate students were not charged for daily supplies, and the school sold their artworks, deducting fifty percent to cover material costs, with the remainder returned to the students (Zhang Jiacun & Peng Yongwen, 2019). The Zhonghua Art Specialized School reorganized its correspondence department in 1920 and reduced tuition fees. While Zhou Xiang’s art schools had a commercial aspect, their primary aim was aesthetic education. Thus, Zhou Xiang’s approach combined commercial viability with a commitment to widespread aesthetic education, ensuring a balanced and practical educational model. The provision of hundreds of free spots demonstrated a charitable approach to teaching. Tuition discounts encouraged and attracted more students to study painting and achieve a high level of proficiency. To ensure the school’s smooth operation, Zhou Xiang actively sought valuable advice, even publishing a call in newspapers inviting domestic and foreign educators to generously share effective management strategies aimed at elevating the school’s standards. Throughout the operation of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School, the extensive recruitment and teaching efforts reached over a thousand students, significantly contributing to the popularization of art.

6. Conclusion

With deepening research on Zhou Xiang and the school’s operations, the study of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School has gained increasing attention. Newly discovered information reveals that the school was initially established in 1908, began officially enrolling students in 1910, and celebrated its 20th anniversary in 1928.
Thus, the school was active for over twenty years, contrary to the previous belief that it had a history of just over ten years. The reasons for the school’s closure include both personal factors related to Zhou Xiang, such as his stubborn personality and inability to adapt socially, which led to personal grievances and competitive pressures, and objective factors like insufficient human and material resources.

The art education activities of the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School reflect the early modern art education landscape in China. The school was innovative, adopting European and American correspondence teaching methods to cultivate the art talents urgently needed by society. This approach aligned with contemporary trends and promoted the development of art education. It spurred the establishment of private art schools in Shanghai and marked a new chapter in modern Chinese art education. As scholar Hu Guanghua (1999) stated, regardless of whether Zhou Xiang had the ambition to pioneer Chinese art education and promote a Chinese Renaissance when he founded the private art school, his attempt provided valuable inspiration and reference for future generations.

In summary, the Chinese and Western Painting Correspondence School played a crucial role in the evolution of modern art education in China. Its innovative correspondence teaching model, comprehensive curriculum, and commitment to both artistic skill and moral education provided a valuable framework for future art education initiatives. Zhou Xiang’s legacy, characterized by his pioneering efforts and dedication to aesthetic education, continues to inspire and guide contemporary art educators and students alike.

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