


# Temporal Context, Changes in Educational Systems, and Individual Interests: The Formation of Artistic Erudite Scholars among Chinese Overseas Students in the Early 20th Century<sup>1</sup>

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/aris.93750>

Recibido: 17 de enero de 2024 • Aceptado: 26 de junio de 2024

**ENG Abstract:** This article examines a group of artists who excelled in multiple fields among Chinese overseas students in the early 20th century, with the aim of exploring the multifaceted reasons behind the emergence of these erudite scholars. First, during the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, overseas students introduced Western art to China, ushering in the modern transformation of Chinese art. The early 20th century, marked by the blending of new learning and old learning, allowed overseas students to comprehensively understand the diversified knowledge systems of both Chinese and foreign cultures. Second, the influence of the art education model was significant. Earlier, under the influence of the normal Japanese education model and Eastern artistic concepts, there was an emphasis on the commonality of music, fine arts, and literature. However, with the introduction of the European art education model, the polymath phenomenon gradually diminished. Finally, the educational atmosphere within artists' own families and their personal interests also significantly influenced the development of their diverse talents. This group of artistic polymaths represents a distinctive phenomenon in the cultural exchange and transformation period of modern Chinese society.

**Keywords:** Chinese overseas students, artistic polymaths, temporal context, art education models, individual talent.

## ES Contexto temporal, cambios en los sistemas educativos e intereses individuales: la formación de eruditos artísticos entre los estudiantes chinos de ultramar a principios del siglo XX

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina un grupo de artistas que destacaron en múltiples campos entre los estudiantes chinos de ultramar a principios del siglo XX, con el objetivo de explorar las polifacéticas razones que subyacen a la aparición de estos «eruditos». En primer lugar, a finales de la dinastía Qing y principios de la República de China, los estudiantes de ultramar introdujeron el arte occidental en China, marcando el comienzo de la transformación moderna del arte chino. A principios del siglo XX, marcado por la mezcla del «nuevo aprendizaje» y el «viejo aprendizaje», permitió a los estudiantes extranjeros comprender en profundidad los diversos sistemas de conocimiento de las culturas china y extranjera. En segundo lugar, la influencia del modelo de educación artística fue significativa. Anteriormente, bajo la influencia del modelo educativo japonés normal y los conceptos artísticos orientales, se hacía hincapié en lo común de la música, las bellas artes y la literatura. Sin embargo, con la introducción del modelo europeo de educación artística, el fenómeno del «polímata» disminuyó gradualmente. Por último, el ambiente educativo dentro de las propias familias de los artistas y sus intereses personales también influyeron significativamente en el desarrollo de sus diversos talentos. Este grupo de «polímatas» artísticos representa un fenómeno distintivo en el periodo de intercambio cultural y transformación de la sociedad china moderna.

**Palabras clave:** Estudiantes chinos en el extranjero, polímatas artísticos, contexto temporal, modelos de educación artística, talento individual.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction, 2. Polymaths among Chinese Art Students, 3. Influence of the Transition from East to West and the Transformation of Old and New Knowledge in the Early 20th Century, 4. Impact of Modern

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the 2023 Jiangsu Province Social Science Foundation General Project (Number: 23YSB004).

Japanese and Western Education Systems on Artistic Polymaths in China, 5. Influence of Individual Family Environments and Interests, 6. Conclusion and Prospects. References.

**Cómo citar:** Zhu, P. (2024). Temporal Context, Changes in Educational Systems, and Individual Interests: The Formation of Artistic Erudite Scholars among Chinese Overseas Students in the Early 20th Century. *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad* 36(4), 789–800. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/aris.93750>

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the history of both Eastern and Western cultures, there have been many legendary figures who have excelled in multiple fields. They were either well versed in multiple specializations within a particular discipline, or had the ability to research across different academic fields. Such individuals are commonly referred to as “trans-disciplinary scholars,” “polymaths,” “generalists,” or “universal men.”

During the Italian Renaissance, a cohort of “polymaths” emerged, encompassing individuals who were not only painters but also architects and literary figures. Some architects and engineers were concurrently engaged in scientific pursuits (Chen 2022: 8). Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was the most renowned polymath, proficient in numerous disciplines such as painting, sculpture, architecture, music, military affairs, and physics. In ancient China, polymaths excelled in multiple fields, such as literature, technology, military strategy, and philosophy. Notable figures include Su Song (1020–1101), Shen Kuo (1031–1095), and Wang Yangming (1472–1592). Similarly, the realm of arts witnessed versatile talents such as Xu Wei (1521–1593) and Li Yu (1611–1680).

Throughout history, Eastern and Western scholars have received considerable attention and research focus. From the perspective of cultural evolution, the rich tradition of erudite scholars in the East and the multi-disciplinary exploration of Western philosophers provide positive reference points for the contemporary promotion of interdisciplinary reading (Burke 2020: 9). Over the past few decades, research on erudite scholars among modern Chinese overseas students has made significant strides. For instance, studies have explored Li Shutong’s artistic achievements in Western painting and drama (Kim 2016: 8) and Pang Xunqin’s role as an artist, designer, and scholar of Chinese art history (Zhu 2009: 190). The author previously analyzed the cultural identity and national consciousness perspectives of a group of modern-era overseas students proficient in both oil and traditional Chinese painting (Author 2023: 205).

Currently, research on the artistic versatility of modern Chinese overseas students tends to focus primarily on individual case studies, with limited explorations of this collective phenomenon from the perspectives of cultural exchange and artistic education among overseas students. This study provides new research perspectives on artistic versatility among overseas students by examining the dimensions of era, education, and individual experiences.

## 2. Artistic Polymaths among Overseas Students in the Late Qing and Republican Eras

### 2.1. Overview of Artistic Polymaths among Overseas Students

Following the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895, there was a rapid surge in the number of Chinese students studying in Japan, marking an unprecedented move toward a single destination. Subsequently, after the 1919 “Study and Work in France” movement, Chinese students flocked to Europe for academic pursuits. Overseas students not only brought new ideologies to traditional Chinese society but also actively implemented them (Reynolds 1993: 43). Among them, a significant number emerged as artistic polymaths that exhibited proficiency in various disciplines. Some were adept at law and politics, poetry, fine arts, and music within the humanities, while others demonstrated a remarkable crossover between scientific and artistic disciplines. This phenomenon constitutes a meaningful aspect of the cohort of modern Chinese students studying abroad.

Prominent artists who studied in Japan include Chen Shizeng (1876–1923), who initially focused on natural history but later excelled in poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving (Lai 2006: 33). Yao Mangfu (1876–1930), a graduate of Tokyo University’s Faculty of Law, resigned from a governmental position upon his return to China, displaying proficiency in poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Together with Chen Shizeng, Yao Mangfu emerged as a prominent figure in the early-20th-century traditional literati painting scene in Beijing. Jing Hengyi (1877–1938), who graduated from Tokyo Higher Normal School’s Physics Department, dedicated himself to education while exhibiting profound skills in calligraphy, painting, and seal carving. Li Shutong (1880–1942), during his time in Tokyo, pursued studies in oil painting and music, alongside proficiency in drama and calligraphy (Sullivan 2023: 73). Guan Liang (1900–1986) was proficient in oil painting, violin, traditional Chinese painting, and Chinese opera. Yan Zhikai (1894–1942) initially entered the Tokyo Music School to study music but soon switched to oil painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Later, he furthered his studies in Western painting at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Lu Xun (1881–1936) was legendary for abandoning medicine for literature during his time in Japan. He also exhibited a profound knowledge of print-making, art history, and book design (Rawat 1982: 43). Lu Xun recalled that the immediate reason for him to give up medicine and turn to literature was that after watching the “educational film on the Russo-Japanese War”, he was deeply convinced that studying medicine could only heal the bodies of the people, but could not open up the minds of the people, so he turned to literature (Lu 2005: 317).

In addition, there were many versatile individuals among the students studying in Europe and America. For instance, Yang Zhongzi (1885–1962) initially studied chemistry in France, but later moved to music. Upon returning to China, he engaged in calligraphy and seal carving. Li Yishi (1886–1942) studied physics and fine arts at the University of Glasgow. Wu Fading (1883–1924) began his law studies in France and later enrolled in the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris to study oil painting.

Pang Xunqin (1906–1985), who had a passion for art and music from a young age, studied painting in France and later shifted to arts and crafts research. Xu Zhimo (1897–1931) studied history and politics in the United States and United Kingdom and achieved notable accomplishments in poetry and art theory. Lin Wenzheng (1902–1989) studied at the University of Paris, majoring in French literature and minoring in Western art history (Shen 2008: 95). There are many more examples of such artistic polymaths, and the author continues to compile them.

Among the international students, the “erudite scholars,” whether studying in Japan or the West, include those who, after initially studying literature, politics, physics, or chemistry, later switched to or concurrently pursued studies in the arts. Some also engaged in simultaneous studies of fine arts and music. The origins, study situations, and interdisciplinary pursuits of artistic polymaths among Chinese international students in the 20th century are detailed in Table I.

Table I. Interdisciplinary Artistic Polymaths among Chinese International Students in the Early 20th Century

No.	Name	Birth-Death	Birthplace	Study Period	Study Abroad: School and Major	Interdisciplinary Areas
1	Chen Shizeng	(1876–1923)	Jiangxi Yining	1902–1909	Japan, Tokyo University for the Study of Art and Science, Botany	Botany, Poetry, Calligraphy, Chinese Painting, Seal Carving
2	Yao Mangfu	(1876–1930)	Guizhou Guizhu	1904–1908	Japan, Tokyo University, Faculty of Law, Banking Seminar	Politics and Law, Poetry, Calligraphy, Painting, Seal Carving, Music
3	Yu Shaosong	(1882–1949)	Zhejiang Longyou	1906–1910	Japan, Tokyo University, Faculty of Law	Politics and Law, Calligraphy, Chinese Painting
4	Jing Hengyi	(1877–1938)	Zhejiang Shangyu	1902–1910	Japan, Tokyo Higher Normal School, Mathematics and Physics	Physics, Calligraphy, Chinese Painting, Seal Carving
5	Li Shutong	(1880–1942)	Zhejiang Pinghu	1906–1911	Japan, Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Oil Painting), Tokyo Music School (Music)	Oil Painting, Music, Drama, Calligraphy, etc.
6	Zhang Daqian	(1899–1983)	Sichuan Neijiang	1917–1919	Japan, Kyoto City School of Arts and Crafts, Major in Dyeing and Weaving	Arts and Crafts, Poetry, Calligraphy, Chinese Painting, Seal Carving
7	Chen Zhifo	(1896–1962)	Zhejiang Yuyao	1920–1926	Japan, Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Major in Patterns	Arts and Crafts, Chinese Painting
8	Fu Baoshi	(1904–1965)	Jiangxi Xinyu	1933–1935	Japan, Tokyo Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, Study of Oriental Art History	Chinese Painting, Art History
9	Feng Zikai	(1898–1975)	Zhejiang Jiaxing	1921–1922	Japan, Kawabata Art School, Major in Oil Painting	Painting, Music, Arts and Crafts
10	Liu Zhiping	(1894–1978)	Zhejiang Ninghai	1916–1918	Japan, Tokyo Music School, Major in Music	Music, Painting, Arts and Crafts
11	Wang Daoyuan	(1896–1960)	Hunan Changde	1916–1930	1916, Japan, Kawabata School of Fine Arts	Oil Painting, Drama
					1920–1923, Japan, Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Western Painting)	
					1926–1930, Japan, Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Western Painting, Research Department)	
12	Xu Xingzhi	(1904–1991)	Jiangsu Yangzhou	1924–1929	Japan, Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Major in Western Painting	Oil Painting, Film, Drama, Literature
13	Tian Han	(1898–1968)	Hunan Changsha	1916–1922	Japan, Tokyo Higher Normal School, Major in Literature	Literature, Drama
14	Xia Yan	(1900–1995)	Zhejiang Hangzhou	1920–1927	Japan, Kitakyushu Meiji Specialized School (Electrical Engineering), Kyushu Imperial University, Faculty of Engineering (Metallurgy)	Literature, Film, Drama

No.	Name	Birth-Death	Birthplace	Study Period	Study Abroad: School and Major	Interdisciplinary Areas
15	Ni Yide	(1901-1970)	Zhejiang Hangzhou	1927-1928	Japan, Kawabata School of Fine Arts, Major in Western Painting	Oil Painting, Literature
16	Guan Liang	(1900-1986)	Guangdong Panyu	1917-1923	Japan, Kawabata School of Fine Arts, Pacific School of Fine Arts (Oil Painting)	Oil Painting, Music, Chinese Painting, Drama
17	Yan Zhikai	(1894-1942)	Zhili Tianjin	1912-1928	1912-1918, Japan, Tokyo Music School, Major in Music	Music, Oil Painting, Museums
					1921-1928, France, National School of Fine Arts, Major in Oil Painting	
18	Zeng Zhimin	(1879-1929)	Fujian Tong'an	1901-1907	Japan, Tokyo Waseda University, Major in Law, Study of Music at Tokyo Music School	Law, Music
19	Ouyang Yuqian	(1889-1962)	Hunan Liuyang	1904-1911	Japan, Seijo Middle School, Meiji University (Commerce), Waseda University (Liberal Arts)	Literature, Commerce, Drama
20	Lu Xun	(1881-1936)	Zhejiang Shaoxing	1902-1909	Japan, Hosei University, Ordinary Department, Jiangnan Class, Sendai Medical Specialized School	Literature, Arts and Crafts, Art History
21	Jin Cheng (Gongbei)	(1878-1926)	Zhejiang Wuxing	1902-1905	UK, King's College, Law Studies	Law, Calligraphy, Chinese Painting
22	Yang Zhongzi	(1885-1962)	Jiangsu Nanjing	1903-1910	France, University of Grenoble, Department of Science	Chemistry, Music, Calligraphy, Seal Carving
				1910-1918	Switzerland, Geneva Conservatory of Music, Major in Music	
23	Li Yishi	(1886-1942)	Jiangsu Wujin	1904-1916	UK, University of Glasgow, Department of Fine Arts and Physics	Physics, Oil Painting
24	Wu Fading	(1883-1924)	Henan Xinyang	1911-1919	France, Preliminary Study of Law, Paris Academy of Fine Arts, Major in Oil Painting	Law (or Chemistry), Oil Painting
25	Wang Rujiu	(1887-?)	Zhili Tianjin	1907-1928	France, Ecole Speciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr, Paris Art Research Institute, Major in Oil Painting and Sculpture	Military Science, Oil Painting, Sculpture
26	Zeng Zhushao	(1908-2012)	Fujian Xiamen	1929-1935	France, Lyon School of Fine Arts, Paris National School of Fine Arts, Major in Sculpture, Paris Conservatory of Music, Major in Violin (Under the tutelage of the famous violinist Paul Obe de Ofer)	Sculpture, Music
27	Pang Xunqin	(1906-1985)	Jiangsu Changshu	1927-1930	France, Paris Julian Academy, Gran Chateau de L'Or Research Institute, Major in Painting (Under the tutelage of Mrs. Mellon, studying music)	Music, Painting, Arts and Crafts
28	Li Jinfan	(1900-1976)	Guangdong Meixian	1919-1925	France, Dijon National School of Fine Arts, Paris Higher School of Fine Arts, Engaged in neo-poetry during the period	Sculpture, Poetry
29	Wang Guangqi	(1892-1936)	Sichuan Wenjiang	1920-1936	Germany, Frankfurt, Study of Political Economics, later studied music and obtained a doctoral degree from the University of Bonn	Political Economics, Music
30	Liao Shangguo (Qingzhu)	(1893-1959)	Guangdong Huiyang	1912-1927	Germany, Berlin University, Faculty of Law, concurrent study of piano and composition theory, Doctor of Law	Law, Music, Art History

No.	Name	Birth-Death	Birthplace	Study Period	Study Abroad: School and Major	Interdisciplinary Areas
31	Xu Zhimo	(1897-1931)	Zhejiang Haining	1918-1923	1918-1919, USA, Clark University, Department of History	Political Economics, Economics, Poetry, Art History
					1919-1920, USA, Columbia University, Department of Economics	
					1921-1922, UK, London School of Economics, Study of Political Economics	
32	Lin Wenzhen	(1902-1989)	Guangdong Meixian	1919-1927	France, Major in French Literature at the University of Paris, optional study in Western Art History	French Literature, Art History

Source: Author's elaboration

### 2.2. Distribution of Scholars Studying Abroad

Among the 32 individuals (35 study instances) in the sample, 20 studied in Japan and 8 in France, ranking first and second, respectively (Table II). The United Kingdom and United States were the third- and fourth-most popular destinations. This distribution aligns with the overall distribution of study destinations for modern and contemporary art students (Li 2004: 12). Japan emerged as the primary destination for Chinese students in the modern era, mainly because of its objective advantages, such as proximity, cultural affinity, shorter study duration, and cost-effectiveness (Liu 1998: 24). In contrast, studying in Western countries incurred higher costs and involved longer distances, resulting in a relatively lower number of students selecting these destinations.

Table II. Distribution of Study Instances among Artistic Polymaths by Country

Country	Number of Instances	Note
Japan	20	Yang Zhongzi studied in France and Switzerland successively. Yan Zhikai studied in both Japan and France. Xu Zhimo studied in the United States and United Kingdom successively. (A total of 32 individuals with 35 study instances).
United Kingdom	3	
France	8	
United States	1	
Germany	2	
Switzerland	1	

Source: Author's elaboration

### 2.3. Correlation Analysis of Scholars' Study Duration, Study Destinations, and Instances

We divided 1902 to 1933 into seven periods and observed the distribution of the study destinations of 32 scholars during these periods. The number of scholars studying abroad showed significant fluctuations. The periods from 1902 to 1905 and 1916 to 1920 had the most intensive study-abroad activities, with the highest number of students studying in Japan during these two periods (Table III).

Table III. Study Duration, Study Destinations, and Instance Statistics

Time Period	Japan	UK	France	USA	Germany	Switzerland	Total
1902-1905	6	2	1	0	0	0	9
1906-1910	2	0	1	0	0	1	3
1911-1915	1	0	1	0	1	0	2
1916-1920	7	1	2	1	1	0	12
1921-1925	2	0	1	0	0	0	3
1926-1930	2	0	2	0	0	0	4
1931-1933	1	0	0	0	0	0	1

Source: Author's elaboration

## 2.4. Statistical Analysis of Disciplines and Majors Among Art Scholars Studying Abroad

Art scholars who studied abroad and engaged in disciplines and majors both overseas and upon returning to China covered a wide range of subjects, including music, fine arts, physics, chemistry, etc., totaling over 20 different fields. The frequencies of their disciplines are shown in Figure 1. Among these, painting (including Chinese painting and oil painting), literature (including classical and modern poetry), and music (including piano, violin, and composition) ranked in the top three. Calligraphy and drama shared the fourth position in terms of frequency. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2023), the "Notice on the Announcement of the Record and Approval Results of Undergraduate Majors of General Higher Education Institutions for the Year 2022" includes various specialized directions such as 130101 Art History, 130202 Musicology, 130302 Drama, 130402 Painting, 130403 Sculpture, 130405T Calligraphy, 130406T Chinese Painting, 130507 Arts and Crafts, and others. The majors studied by the art scholars covered most art disciplines.

This article posits that there are three main reasons for the emergence of artistic "versatility" in the early 20th century. First, the late Qing and early Republican periods were a time of convergence and replacement of old and new knowledge. Second, from the perspective of the evolution of modern education systems, schools transitioned from imitating normal Japanese education to adopting European and American models. Third, from the viewpoint of individual artists, it depended on personal interests, talent, and the influence of the family atmosphere.

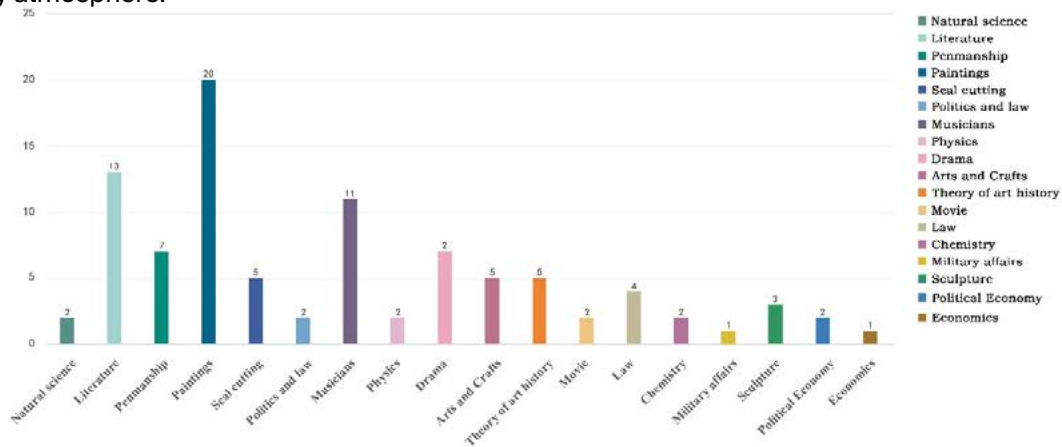


Figure 1. Frequency Statistics of Disciplines and Majors Covered by Interdisciplinary Art Scholars Studying Abroad

Source: Author's elaboration

## 3. The Impact of Western Learning Moving Eastward and the Transformation of Old and New Knowledge

### 3.1. Collision and Exchange between New Learning and Old Learning

In the late Qing Dynasty, Western learning moved eastward, bringing Western culture, technology, and other "new learning" to China. Under the impetus of Chinese intellectual elites, Western "new learning" gradually became the main content of the education system and was endowed with the mission and significance of saving the nation and transforming its character (Bai 2019: 21). This trend became more pronounced in 1905, when the imperial examination system, which lasted for thousands of years, ended. The content of the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty mainly included the Four Books (The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Confucian Analects, and The Works of Mencius 《大學》《中庸》《論語》《孟子》) and Five Classics (The Book of Songs, The Book of History, The Book of Changes, The book of Rites, and The Spring and Autumn annals 《周易》《尚書》《詩經》《禮記》《春秋》). Candidates were required to invest a considerable amount of time in memorization and respond using classical Chinese. Additionally, the examinations assessed candidates' understanding of current affairs and their problem-solving abilities. These "old learning" practices, which have been passed down for centuries, have become severely disconnected from the needs of the era. However, outside the new-style schools, traditional "old learning" represented by "private study" did not completely stop. This folk-based mode of knowledge transmission continues to play a crucial role in preserving traditional culture. Therefore, during the unique historical period of late Qing to early Republic, there emerged a phenomenon where "new learning" and "old learning" coexisted and complemented each other in the educational landscape. Despite starkly different cultural and spiritual values, both forms of education persist.

The coexistence of the new Western educational models and traditional Chinese methods is evident in art education. On the one hand, the new-style Western school art education model is still in its exploratory stage, and art disciplines have not yet been fully refined according to Western classification standards, such as fine arts and music. However, traditional Confucian artistic cultivation concepts and mentor-discipline teaching methods continue to function in established ways. China's intellectual class continues the tradition of art

education, relying on art gatherings, study societies, etc., which preserve the cultivation model of “zither(琴), chess(棋), calligraphy(書), and painting(畫)” in the literati tradition (Xue 2017: 466).

For a long time, intellectual classes in China and Europe had distinctly different understandings of painting. European painting, to the Chinese, falls under the category of applied arts rather than the fine arts tradition recognized by the Chinese intellectual class. However, Chinese painting, including scroll, porcelain, and ink painting, were perceived by Europeans as a form of practical art (Lynn, 2017), which persisted until the end of the Qing Dynasty. The “Six Arts” in the educational system of the ancient Chinese Zhou Dynasty nobility referred to skills in ritual (禮), music (樂), archery (射), charioteering (禦), calligraphy (書), and mathematics (數). In this sense, the connotation of “art” in ancient China is broader than the term “art” in the Western sense.

Traditional Chinese Confucianism holds that the morality and cultivation of the literati are as important as the acquisition of knowledge. In the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan recorded in “Fashu Yaolu” that “debate, extensive learning, skilled in composition, and proficiency in qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting are all exquisite” (Zhang 2016: 125). Subsequently, being proficient in “zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting (琴棋書畫)” became a common standard for the artistic cultivation of literati and officials, continuing through the late Qing and Republican periods. Before embracing the “new learning,” the artistic “omniscient” of the late Qing and Republican periods had certain accomplishments in “old learning,” as well as in “zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting (琴棋書畫).” It can be said that the era of cultural intersection between China and the West provided fertile ground for the emergence of artistic polymaths.

In an era of cultural integration between China and the West, Chinese students became traditional literati embracing the “new learning” or modern intellectuals continuing the “old learning.” They were more likely to achieve a broad understanding of both ancient and modern, master knowledge from both China and the West, and apply cross-disciplinary insights in their studies.

### 3.2. Impact of the Western Educational System on the Definition and Connotations of Art in China

Since the 19th century, modern Western science has undergone unprecedented development, leading to a significant increase in knowledge in both the natural and social sciences. These changes had a profound impact on the Chinese academic community in the early 20th century.

Faced with the dominant influence of Western culture, the traditional Chinese classification system known as the “Four-Category System” (jing, shi, zi, ji) was no longer suitable for modern scientific classification. It was necessary to reconstruct it according to the logic of Western academic systems. In this context, Western concepts and classification methods related to “art,” “fine arts,” “music,” and other disciplines were introduced to China. The definition of “art” in China began to be deeply influenced by Western artistic concepts. A clear indicator of this influence is the appearance of literature and cataloging methods in modern Chinese bibliographies, where “fine arts” and “music” started to replace “art.” Music, once part of “classics” and ritual classics, returned to being considered an art form in its own right.

In fact, traditional Chinese literati arts encompass various practices such as zither (琴), chess (棋), calligraphy (書), painting (畫), poetry (詩), and seal engraving (印), which share similarities with Western classifications of fine arts and music, yet also exhibit differences (Yin 2021: 14). Early discussions on the concept of “fine arts” by figures like Cai Yuanpei and Lu Xun in China broadly included painting, literature, music, dance, and more, with a connotation similar to the contemporary understanding of “art.” In the initial establishment of the discipline of Chinese art, many overseas students, despite receiving Western education, were still influenced by the traditional concept of artistic cultivation expressed in the phrase “mastering the qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting.” While Western concepts of “art” encompass disciplines such as fine arts, music, and drama, which may appear distinct, they also share commonalities.

Modern China, transitioning from a closed agricultural society to an open modern society, faces the challenge of transforming traditional Confucianism and its artistic concepts. Due to the deep-rooted influence of traditional culture, coupled with the asynchronous understanding of “art” by the Chinese intellectual class compared to the West, the transformation of research and teaching in art disciplines such as fine arts, music, drama, and art theory has been slower than in the West. Influenced by the transformation of the connotation of the concept of “art” between the East and the West, artistic versatility has emerged among modern Chinese overseas students. This also reflects the characteristics of the times when East meets West.

### 3.3. Synesthesia and Polymaths in Art

Modern scientific research indicates that the emergence of modern art polymaths provides theoretical support for neurophysiology (Mulvenna 2007: 206). From the perspective of human psychology and the deep structures underlying aesthetics, the aesthetic images generated by visual, auditory, and spatial perception can achieve a certain degree of harmony and mutual understanding—a phenomenon known as “synesthesia” or “artistic synesthesia.” “Synesthesia,” as a mode of artistic thinking, can go beyond a single perception of aesthetic objects and form a holistic experience, simultaneously enhancing aesthetic perception and increasing the expressive and emotional power of art. Typically, visual artists with sound-color synesthesia or sequence-space synesthesia have a higher prevalence and display more divergent creative abilities (Lunke et al. 2019: 727).

Chinese artists also have a deep appreciation for the role of artistic association in learning. While studying painting at the Pacific Art School in Japan, Guan Liang also studied hard on the violin, improving his skills in both music and art. Guan Liang said: “It is true that both art and music have the beauty of color and melody; both have the effect of directly stimulating the human senses and arousing sensual and vivid image thinking. Listening to beautiful and noble music is like admiring a precious painting,” which greatly contributes to the

improvement of artistic quality (Guan 1984: 27). It is evident that, in the eyes of both Chinese and foreign artists, music, painting, and drama share common principles of artistic laws and emotions.

In 1936, aesthetics scholar Zhu Guangqian provided a thorough interpretation of the concept of “artistic synesthesia” in his book “Psychology of Literature and Art,” highlighting the intrinsic relationship between various senses of beauty and artistic associations (Ni 1936: 66). The renowned Chinese scholar Qian Zhongshu has detailed the crucial role of synesthesia in aesthetic appreciation. According to Qian Zhongshu, “synaesthesia” or “sensory displacement” is a psychological or linguistic term. From a physiological point of view, “in daily experience, the senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste can often communicate or traffic with each other, and the domains of the eyes, ears, tongue, nose, and body can be divided into different areas without boundary.” (Qian, 1994: 65).

These theories shed light on the theoretical basis for the emergence of art polymaths among overseas students, offering a scientific perspective on the phenomenon of cross-disciplinary understanding among art scholars in literature, music, fine arts, and other fields.

## 4. Chinese Modern Educational System and Its Impact on Art Polymaths

### 4.1. Three Educational Systems in Modern China and Art Education

Although the higher education of early modern Chinese artistic polymaths was completed abroad, it was also closely related to the local basic education environment in which they grew up, with the ways and means of Chinese education coming from institutional decisions made by government departments. On the whole, Chinese education cultivated a certain interest in the arts and laid a cultural foundation that was very helpful to these scholars when they went abroad to study. Therefore, we can explore this perspective to discuss the correlation between the change of modern education system and the number of art polymaths in China.

Modern art polymaths in early China started out high in number but gradually decreased over time. This phenomenon is intricately linked to the evolution of China’s educational system. From the late Qing Dynasty to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, three major educational systems played pivotal roles in shaping the modern transformation of Chinese education. These were the “Renyin-Guimao Education System” (including the 1903 “Renyin Education System” and the 1904 “Guimao Education System”), the “Renzi-Guichou Education System” (1912), and the “Renxu Education System” (1922). These three educational systems defined the guiding ideology of national education, overall direction, and talent cultivation objectives and models for schools at various levels. These systems profoundly influencing the training models and artistic concepts of students. They show a shift in China’s educational model from learning from Japan to learning from Europe.

In the early period, drawing on the normal Japanese education model, emphasis was placed on the breadth of knowledge and rapid adaptability, focusing on the broadness and universality of art education (Andrews & Shen 2006: 6). In the later period, influenced by Western European models, the art education system underwent continuous specialization, placing greater emphasis on the depth of research in specific fields, such as fine arts and music. This shift in the education model led to a phenomenon in which, in the early stages, overseas students commonly excelled in literature, music, and fine arts. However, from the 1930s onward, Western art education models resulted in fewer individuals possessing a broad range of artistic skills.

### 4.2. Art Education Under the Renyin-Guimao School System

After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, the Qing government sought to learn and emulate new educational models from Japan. The “Renyin-Guimao School System” was formulated by referring to the Japanese educational model, with the educational principles being “loyalty to the monarch, respect for Confucius, emphasis on public welfare, appreciation for martial virtues, and pursuit of practicality” (Li et al. 2007: 187). This system marked the beginning of the construction of teacher education in China, with many traces imitating the Japanese educational system. It was a combination of the new school system and the traditional imperial examination system.

Art education under the “Renyin-Guimao School System” generally leaned toward exploration and popularization for the masses. Professionalism in art education was not strong, and it was common to combine painting, music, and even physical education into a single subject.

For example, in 1906, Liangjiang Normal School established the Painting and Handicraft Department, with painting and handicrafts as the main subjects and music as a subsidiary subject. In 1911, Zhejiang’s two-tier school established the Graphics and Music Department, where painting and music coexisted. The curriculum and teaching methods were generally similar to those at Liangjiang Normal School. Teachers included Jiang Danshu, Li Shutong, and several Japanese instructors.

The art departments at the three mentioned schools were called the “Painting and Handicraft Department” or “Graphics and Music Specialized Department,” not simply “Painting Department” or “Music Department.” This clearly specified painting as the main subject and music as the subsidiary subject, emphasizing the comprehensiveness of art education.

### 4.3. Art Education under the Nonzi-Kaichou and Imhuxu Academic Systems

In 1912, the “Renzi-Guichou School System” formulated educational principles that aligned with the new political system. It emphasized moral education, supplemented by practical and national education, and



prioritized aesthetic education to fulfill its moral objectives. Notably, under the advocacy of educator Cai Yuanpei, “aesthetic education” was historically separated and elevated to the same level as moral and national education.

In 1919, the Republic of China Education Survey Commission, drawing on Germany’s experience of higher education, formulated the educational goal of “cultivating a sound personality and developing the spirit of the republic by adopting the strengths of England, France, and the United States.” This goal was incorporated into the “Renxu School System” promulgated in 1922.

After the promulgation of the “Renxu School System,” Chinese art schools began to study and adopt the European model. This shift in the educational system gradually extended to various aspects of art education, including faculty recruitment, curriculum design, educational philosophy, and teaching methods.

#### 4.4. Transition from Imitating Japan to Learning from Europe and America

With the shift in the education system from imitating Japan to learning from Europe and the United States, two distinct talent cultivation models emerged. Many art students returning from Europe joined national art education institutions, leading to the gradual formalization, theoretical development, and systematization of Chinese art education. At comprehensive universities and specialized art schools, art departments, including fine arts and music departments, began to offer specialized courses or group instruction. With the establishment of specialized national institutions for fine arts, music, and crafts, there was an increased emphasis on specialization and refinement in professional settings and curriculum design. The previous practice of simultaneously studying music, fine art, and applied art ceased to exist. These changes demonstrate that, under the influence of European and American educational systems, art education became more specialized and targeted, and emphasized professionalism.

After the nationalist government established its capital in Nanjing, various national art education institutions were founded. In 1927, the first independent higher professional music institution in China, the “National Conservatory of Music,” was established in Shanghai, with Cai Yuanpei serving as president and Xiao Youmei as dean of academic affairs (Gong 2008: 40). In 1928, the first national art academy in China, the “National Academy of Art,” was founded in Hangzhou. The academy had departments for painting, design, sculpture, architecture, etc., but no longer offered music as a minor.

In terms of strategy, Republican-era art education underwent a historical shift from imitating Japan to borrowing from the European model. Traditional “old learning” and the Japanese influence gradually diminished since the late Qing Dynasty. Specialization in training talent for fine arts, music, and drama eliminated the possibility of fostering art polymaths in the teaching system. Therefore, the emergence of art polymaths among overseas students in the 1930s and 1940s was mainly influenced by individual talent, interests, and family upbringing.

### 5. Individual Family Environment and the Influence of Interests

#### 5.1. Environmental Influence as an External Factor

It should be noted that when analyzing the influence of specific environmental factors on individual artists who became polymaths, personal interests and talent play major roles. Polymath artists emerge due to a combination of various factors. The occurrence of modern and contemporary artistic polymaths can be attributed to societal and personal factors. The former includes the transformation of old and new knowledge during the influx of Western learning into the East and the impact of artistic education models, while the latter encompasses personal artistic interests, talents, and family influence.

As mentioned earlier, the traditional literati class in ancient China had a long-standing tradition of emphasizing artistic cultivation. During the late Qing and early Republican periods, family education retained some principles of the traditional “old learning,” where the learning content still included classical Confucian texts and traditional Chinese arts. However, the new-style school education received by the intellectual class showed many traces of the Japanese teacher education system. However, whether in family education or new-style school education, a broad approach to knowledge learning was highly emphasized, placing significant importance on a child’s all-encompassing artistic cultivation, including proficiency in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting.

Therefore, during the late Qing period, overseas students had an edge over their successors in terms of traditional and artistic cultivation. Influenced by social trends and family upbringing, they were more inclined to choose traditional arts as their research focus alongside academic studies. Examples include Chen Shizeng, Yao Mangfu, Yu Shaosong, Jing Hengyi, and Jin Gongbei. Despite their extensive overseas experience, they retained a foundation in traditional culture. Upholding the traditional concepts of cultivating poetry, calligraphy, and painting concurrently, they harbored a deep-seated attachment to traditional literati painting and calligraphy.

The son of the renowned modern Chinese scholar and educator Yan Xiu (1860-1929), Yan Zhikai received a thorough and formal art education at home from an early age. Yan Xiu regarded education as a way to salvage China’s decline: “In 1903, Yan Xiu, following the example of Japan’s new education system, established a ‘Mengyangyuan’ (kindergarten) at home, hiring the Japanese teacher Ohno Reiko for instruction. Ohno’s curriculum included music, piano playing, gymnastics, games, and handicrafts, with a focus on piano playing” (Qi 2015: 6). These early artistic courses laid the foundation for Yan Zhikai’s career development.

On August 24, 1911, Yan Zhikai received a government scholarship to attend the Tokyo Music School, majoring in piano with an option in voice (Zhang 1999: 375). After approximately a year of study, Yan became more interested in Western painting. Therefore, he abandoned music and enrolled in the Western Painting Department of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts to study oil painting. In 1920, he gained admission to the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris to study oil painting. Yan received an advanced education from top-tier art institutions in Japan, the United States, and France, making him a versatile talent in music, fine arts, and museum management. His remarkable artistic achievements, including the establishment of the Tianjin Municipal Art Museum and his tenure as head of Beiping Art College, are inseparable from his early family education and artistic upbringing.

Li Shutong was an outstanding early Chinese student studying in Japan, known for his in-depth research in fine arts, music, literature, drama, and calligraphy. He was a rare “polymath” in modern art history. Feng Zikai recalled that “Mr. Li was born into an affluent family, and his father was a well-known banker in Tianjin” (Feng 2021: 180). The affluent family conditions laid the foundation for Li’s exposure to various forms of art, given his broad interests from an early age.

Pang Xunqin was born into a prominent family in Jiangnan during the late Qing Dynasty. In his early years, he received a traditional Confucian education while also being exposed to Western art. In 1923, Pang entered the medical school at St. John University. However, because of his profound interest in art, he abandoned medicine to pursue artistic endeavors. In 1925, he studied oil painting under the Russian artist Gumnisky and later went to Paris for further study. He also learned music from Madame Mellon. In his early years, he was primarily influenced by his family education. Later, driven by his own interests, he chose to delve into oil painting, music, arts, and crafts.

For art students, the pursuit of art is invariably intertwined with the influence of a conducive artistic environment emanating from their families, schools, and other social settings. The examples mentioned earlier represent some of the more typical art students, but it is important to note that other artistic polymaths were also influenced to varying degrees by their families and societies.

## 5.2. Individual Interest as Intrinsic Motivation

The crucial role of artistic interest lies in its ability to focus attention on areas that artists find compelling and activate their talents and powers of reflection. Artistic polymaths among international students generally exhibit a profound attachment to art that is difficult to sever. Individual interests serve as the most important intrinsic driving force for engaging in artistic endeavors.

Switching to arts due to personal interest or passion is quite common among students studying abroad. For instance, Zeng Zhimin initially studied law during his time in Japan but later enrolled in the Tokyo Music School to pursue music. After studying commerce and humanities, Ouyang Yuqian eventually immersed himself in progressive drama. Lu Xun, abandoning medicine, turned to the study of printmaking, art history, and design, becoming widely recognized for his contributions to these fields.

Before studying in Japan, Guan Liang had serious discussions with his family and decided to study applied chemistry. However, upon arriving in Japan, disregarding his family’s advice and encouraged by his friend Xu Dunggu, he successfully enrolled in the Pacific Art School to study oil painting and Western music concurrently (Guan & Lu 1984: 13). Guan Liang’s exploration of oil painting, violin, Chinese painting, traditional drama, etc., was driven by his inner passion.

During the late Qing and early Republican periods, among the Chinese students who went to Europe to study physics, chemistry, and other STEM fields, there were many who, driven by personal interests, switched careers to pursue the arts. Yang Zhongzi, a graduate of the Faculty of Science at the University of Condé in France, originally worked as a chemical engineer but later turned to the study of music and excelled in calligraphy and seal engraving. The term “versatile” is not an exaggeration when applied to him.

In 1911, Wu Fading secured a government-sponsored opportunity to study in France. Initially intending to study chemistry, Wu later developed a strong interest in the fine arts. In contemplating the transition from fine arts to chemistry, he vacillated. He ultimately chose to enter the Corcausse Institute of Fine Arts (Xu 1924: 1). Wu successfully enrolled in the National Higher School of Fine Arts in Paris, becoming its first registered Chinese student.

In 1907, Li Yishi enrolled in the Glasgow School of Art to study oil painting. After five years of systematic academic art training, he received government-sponsored opportunities for further study. Li spent four years studying physics at the University of Glasgow to secure suitable employment after returning to China. His study of painting was driven by passion, whereas he studied physics for practical reasons.

While studying sculpture at the Paris Higher School of Fine Arts, Zeng Zhushao learned to play the violin. He pursued his studies at the Paris Conservatoire under the renowned French violinist Paul Oberdoerffer (1874–1941) for a decade (Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2012). Zeng stated, “Personally, I consider the violin my profession. Although I invested less energy than in fine arts, my passion for the violin is no less than that for sculpture creation. Music is also an indispensable spiritual companion throughout my life” (Li 2009: 38). As an artistic polymath, Zeng’s in-depth understanding of both music and fine art is significant.

During the late Qing and Republic eras of China, overseas students who changed their career paths to pursue art were a minority. We cannot assume the specific circumstances that led these polymaths to beat a new path, but their outstanding achievements in the field of art after the transition are evident. For someone with a love for art and artistic talent, choosing and persisting on their artistic path will ultimately lead to remarkable artistic success.

## 6. Conclusion and Outlook

### 6.1. Conclusions of the study

First, in the early 20th century, many Chinese students studying abroad exhibited the phenomenon of being polymaths across disciplines such as fine arts, music, drama, literature, physics, and law. This was a distinctive occurrence in the history of cultural exchange between China and foreign nations during the late Qing and Republican periods. The emergence of this phenomenon was mainly influenced by factors such as the clash and integration of “new learning” and “old learning,” the evolution of modern educational systems, and the impact of individual interests and family educational environments.

Second, the three primary factors were related to the contextual background of the era. First, the abolition of the traditional imperial examination system in China was coupled with the emergence of a wave of overseas studies at a time when the modern education system was not yet fully established. Second, the blending “new learning” and “old learning” provided a foundation for the diverse integration of Eastern and Western, traditional and modern knowledge systems. Third, the concept of “art” in traditional Chinese culture was both connected to and distinct from the notion of “art” in the modern Western disciplinary knowledge system.

Third, The early “Renyin-Guimao Educational System,” influenced by the Japanese teacher training education model, emphasized the breadth of knowledge absorption and the commonality within artistic disciplines, leading to a higher number of artistic polymaths. After the implementation of the “Ratong Educational System,” Chinese art schools began to adopt the European model, gradually reducing the prevalence of artistic polymaths. The overall trend in the study of modern art disciplines shifted from a “general” approach to a “specialized” one, contributing significantly to the decline in the number of artistic polymaths.

Fourth, the growth of artistic polymaths in modern and contemporary art was closely related to a favorable artistic environment, artistic interests, and talent. The influence of artistic environments came from various sources such as families, schools, or social life. Artists’ personal interests and talent served as critical intrinsic driving forces. The interplay between family influence, individual artistic interests, perseverance, and other internal and external factors manifested differently for each student studying abroad.

Fifth, students studying abroad with a comprehensive understanding of both Eastern and Western cultures experienced Western art in a heterogeneous sociocultural environment and possessed a cross-cultural perspective. Essentially, early students like Chen Shizeng, Yao Mangfu, Yu Shaosong, Jing Hengyi, Jin Gongbei, and Li Shutong can be described as “traditional literati with certain New Learning characteristics” (Liu 2000: 80), or more appropriately as traditional intellectuals with new Western ideas. In contrast, students from the 1920s onward essentially represented modern intellectuals with new ideas, preserving, to some extent, the influence of traditional Chinese cultural art.

### 6.2. Research Gaps and Prospects

This paper was rooted in the historical context of the early-20th-century wave of Chinese overseas students and focused on 32 artistic polymaths. However, the emergence of artistic polymaths among overseas students was influenced by various factors, and there are many opportunities to optimize future research perspectives and methods.

Analyzing the reasons for the emergence of artistic polymaths from the perspective of the era’s transformation of modern Chinese art holds significance. Exploring the ideological origins of artistic polymaths from an overseas perspective and considering cultural and artistic environments beyond the realm of overseas students is equally important. This study selected 32 artistic polymaths as case studies and a research sample; however, future research could further expand the scope and deepen the study of the consistency and individual characteristics of artistic polymaths. This study explored the convergence of the multifaceted abilities of this group of overseas students, presenting a comprehensive study at the group and macroscopic levels. Future research could select typical artistic polymaths from different periods or disciplines for personalized and micro-level comparative studies, deepening the research on the acceptance and influence of artistic perspectives within the localized context of overseas students.

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