

Research Article

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A Model of Early-Stage Artistic Career Development among Chinese Fine Arts Graduates and Implications for Higher Art Education

Ziwei Gong , Pengfei Chen

Abstract

Background/purpose. In recent years, China's flourishing art industry has provided increasing opportunities for fine arts graduates. However, the development of an artistic career remains fraught with challenges. While little research has examined the early-career development of Chinese fine arts graduates, it remains unclear why their career trajectories are so precarious and how higher art education might better support students in pursuing their artistic ambitions. This study aims to investigate the career trajectories of fine arts graduates in China, analyze the challenges they face in the early stages of their careers, and ultimately develop a model of artistic careers for Chinese fine arts graduates.

Materials/methods. The study employed a qualitative grounded theory approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 fine arts graduates and four art experts.

Results. This study built a theoretical framework that traces graduates' trajectories from art training and tests through higher art education to their transition into professional practice—whether along independent, official, or commercial artist paths.

Conclusion. The findings contribute to the understanding of the career development of Chinese graduates after college. Practically, the study provides insights into how higher art education can be strengthened to facilitate the career development of fine arts graduates.

1. Introduction

Graduates situated between education and the labor market have attracted considerable scholarly attention, as their experiences often reflect issues in both education and industry and provide valuable insights for policymaking (Green & Henseke, 2021; Grosemans & De Cuyper, 2021). Creative graduates have long performed relatively poorly in the labor market compared to their non-creative peers, particularly in terms of earnings and job stability (Jewell et al., 2022; Martin & Frenette, 2017; Throsby & Zednik, 2010).

In China, art, as part of the creative industry, has been advocated by the state and used as a key instrument to boost economic growth and promote cultural soft power in the 21st century (Xinhua News Agency, 2022). The flourishing art market has created new opportunities for young Chinese artists, fostering greater visibility and career advancement within both domestic and global contexts (Luo, 2022). Nevertheless, the transition from higher art education to sustainable professional practice remains fraught with challenges (Zhang & Zheng, 2020), raising important questions about how effectively art academies prepare students for the realities of the labor market. This raises an important question: how do fine arts graduates navigate the early stages of their artistic career development in China's transforming art world?

Prior research on artistic career development has primarily focused on Western contexts such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Lee et al., 2018; Martin & Frenette, 2017; Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017). However, non-Western artistic careers remain underexplored, with little known about the early careers of Chinese fine arts graduates as they transition from art schools to the art world.

To address this gap, this study develops a grounded model of early artistic career development among Chinese fine arts graduates within five years of graduation. It explores the main career trajectories, the challenges encountered, and the mechanisms that shape these transitions. Theoretically, this study aims to generate concepts inductively from empirical data rather than imposing existing frameworks, thereby extending grounded understandings of artistic labor in non-Western contexts.

In doing so, the study contributes to international debates on graduate employability, extends the literature on higher art education and creative labor beyond Western-centric frameworks, and offers practical implications for higher arts education policy and practice in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Higher art education and artistic career in the early stage

Art schools play a crucial role in shaping students' artistic identity, encouraging many graduates to pursue careers as professional artists (Scarsbrook, 2021). However, prior research has argued that higher art education often fails to prepare students for such careers, as it tends to prioritize disinterested creation while neglecting commercial realities (Fine, 2017). As a result, many graduates lack the knowledge of how to sustain themselves through art (Fine, 2017). Recent scholarship on artistic careers has highlighted the importance of skills beyond creation—such as entrepreneurship and marketing—which are essential for navigating and managing artistic professions (Frenette & Dowd, 2020; Thom, 2016). These researchers have called for higher art education to recognize the interrelation between art and commerce and to incorporate courses on arts entrepreneurship to better equip graduates for professional success (Frenette & Dowd, 2020; Thom, 2017).

In China, higher art education is similarly regarded as a vital pathway for cultivating professional artists (Zhu, 2020). However, it faces multiple challenges. As in other countries, Chinese fine arts graduates are often considered underprepared, lacking market awareness, and receiving training

that is misaligned with labor market demands (Y. He, 2022). Moreover, Chinese art education has been criticized for constraining students' creativity—an element crucial to career sustainability—by emphasizing reproductive techniques over personal expression in both selection and training processes (Chumley, 2016). In response, China has taken steps to improve the quality of higher art education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Some institutions have begun experimenting with entrepreneurship initiatives and collaborations with digital platforms to support students' career development (Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2024; Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, 2024). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these measures remains to be systematically evaluated.

Moreover, artistic career development after graduation is also far from easy. Previous research, primarily based on Western contexts, suggests that in the early phase of an artistic career, economic and resource constraints constitute critical barriers (Skaggs, 2024). Early-career artists often rely on non-art-related jobs to sustain their livelihood, with limited resources and time for artistic practice, and frequently engage in multiple or hybrid forms of work (Throsby & Zednik, 2011). At the same time, early-career artists are often seen as lacking social capital at a critical stage of resource accumulation, which requires them to actively promote themselves and seek opportunities (Fine, 2017; Skaggs, 2024). In the limited studies on artistic career paths in China, artists have typically been categorized into official and unofficial trajectories, each carrying its own challenges: artists on the official path face the state's supervision and organizational responsibilities, while those on the unofficial path encounter market and art criticism pressures (Liu, 2024).

While developing an artistic career is inherently tricky, the disconnection between education and career realities further intensifies these challenges. To better understand this gap and inform potential interventions, it is necessary to examine how artistic careers unfold in their early stages and the challenges they encounter.

2.2. Phase-based concepts of artistic career development

Previous studies have proposed phase-based models of artistic career development in relation to career achievement or recognition, showing that artists engage in distinct behaviors and strategies during each phase (Lehman & Wickham, 2014; Skaggs, 2024; Throsby & Zednik, 2010). For most fine arts graduates, the early career typically encompasses the starting-out and emerging phases. The starting-out phase marks the beginning of an artist's professional journey, in which they seek initial opportunities for exposure and recognition (Throsby & Zednik, 2010). The emerging phase involves consolidating artistic practice and building a professional identity, often through participation in group exhibitions or collaborations, although income and reputation remain unstable (Creative New Zealand, 2003; Throsby & Zednik, 2010). Early artistic interests and educational experiences are also significant, as they lay the groundwork for later professional development (Jeffri et al., 1991; Zanti, 2015). Figure 1 presents the framework of phase-based concepts of artistic career development in the early stage.

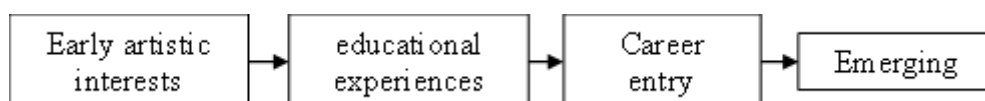


Figure 1. Phase-based concepts of artistic career development in the early stage

However, the trajectory of artistic career development within the Chinese context remains uncertain and may involve distinctive institutional and market dynamics. Therefore, this study adopts these phase-based concepts not as analytical assumptions but as sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2014) to guide the interviews and the interpretation of data. Using a grounded theory approach, the study generated the phases of early artistic career development among Chinese fine arts graduates from data, thereby constructing a conceptual framework grounded in the Chinese context.

3. Methodology

Given the complexity of artistic career development, this study adopts a qualitative research approach to provide a detailed examination of career trajectories and explore the deeper meanings behind these complex phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Given the limited research on artistic careers in China, this study employs grounded theory to develop theories derived from data, aiming to address gaps in this field (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The focus lies on the early career trajectories of Chinese fine arts graduates—examining their formative experiences, current positions, and envisioned futures.

3.1. Sampling and participants

Table 1. Fine arts graduates background

Code	Sex	Age	Final degree	Years after graduation	Major
F1	Female	32	Master	5	Sculpture
F2	Male	29	Master*	3	Printing
F3	Male	30	Master	2	Sculpture
F4	Male	28	Bachelor	5	Oil painting
F5	Female	29	Bachelor	4	Oil painting
F6	Male	28	Bachelor*	5	Sculpture
F7	Female	28	Master*	1	Printing
F8	Female	32	Master	5	Oil painting
F9	Female	27	Master	3	Chinese painting
F10	Male	30	Master*	4	Art education
F11	Female	30	Master	4	Oil painting
F12	Male	29	Master	1	Oil painting
F13	Female	25	Bachelor*	1	Printing
F14	Male	28	Bachelor	5	Printing
F15	Male	31	Master*	2	Mixed media
F16	Female	24	Bachelor*	2	Chinese painting
F17	Male	30	Bachelor*	5	Oil painting
F18	Male	26	Master*	1	Chinese painting
F19	Male	30	Master*	4	Oil painting
F20	Male	28	Master	1	Sculpture
F21	Female	34	Master*	3	Printing
F22	Male	26	Master*	1	Printing
F23	Male	29	Bachelor*	2	Oil painting
F24	Female	28	Bachelor	5	Oil painting
F25	Male	33	Master*	4	Printing
F26	Male	32	Master*	4	Oil painting
F27	Female	26	Bachelor*	3	Sculpture
F28	Male	27	Master	1	Watercolor
F29	Male	29	Bachelor	5	Oil painting
F30	Female	28	Master	2	Calligraphy

Note. * indicates that the graduates earn the degree from one of the nine primary art academies, including Central Academy of Fine Arts, China Academy of Art, Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, and the Academy of Arts & Design of Tsinghua University. These academies are regarded as elite institutions with high prestige in China's art education system.

Table 2. Art field professionals background

Code	Gender	Age	Years of professional experience	Highest degree	Professional title
1EA	Male	34	11	Bachelor	Artist
2CT	Female	32	7	Master	Lecturer
3C	Male	30	5	Master	Independent curator
4CT	Male	57	30	Doctor	Associate Professor

The study employed a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling. Eligible participants included graduates who obtained a Fine Arts degree (as their terminal degree) from a Chinese higher education institution within the past five years and who are continuing to develop artistic careers. To supplement graduates' narratives and illuminate broader field-level dynamics, a small number of contextual informants were included, comprising college teachers, established artists, curators, or gallery owners.

In line with grounded theory procedures, theoretical sampling was subsequently applied to elaborate emergent conceptual categories (Bradley et al., 2007). The cycle of sampling, data collection, and analysis was repeated until no new perspectives emerged and theoretical saturation was reached, resulting in the development of a comprehensive theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). When data appeared unclear or insufficient, additional theoretical sampling was conducted to refine emerging concepts until saturation was confirmed.

This process resulted in a final sample of 34 participants, including 30 fine arts graduates and four art experts. The fine arts graduates were labeled using the first letter of "Fine art graduates" (i.e., "F"), followed by their recruitment order. A summary of the demographic characteristics of fine art graduates is presented in Table 1. For art-field professionals, the coding was based on recruitment order and professional role. University teachers were labeled CT, the established artist EA, and the curator C. The backgrounds of 4 art experts are listed in Table 2.

3.2. Sampling and participants

For data collection, this study used semi-structured interviews to maintain flexibility and depth (Patton, 2014). The interview guides, as research tools, were designed based on the research purposes and the concepts of the phases of artistic careers. For the interview guide targeting fine arts graduates, the focus is on their early interest in art, their art education experience, how they began their artistic career, the subsequent development of their career, and the challenges they encountered along the way. The questions are listed in Table 3. For art-field professionals, the interview guide focused on their experiences and observations regarding artistic career trajectories, as well as their understanding of the main difficulties artists face in developing and sustaining their careers. The questions are listed in Table 4.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Tencent Meeting, which was necessary due to the geographic dispersion of participants. Graduate interviews lasted 60-90 minutes to enable rich biographical narration, while those with educators and art industry professionals were shorter (30-60 minutes), given their complementary roles. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed using iFlytek, and analyzed using NVivo.

Table 3. Interview guide for fine arts graduates

Questions
(1) When did you start creating art? Could you talk about the experiences?
(2) Could you talk about your past experiences in art education?
-What kinds of challenges or difficulties did you encounter during this period, if any?
- How did you deal with these challenges or difficulties?
(3) After graduation, how did you start your artistic career?
-What kinds of challenges or difficulties did you encounter during this period, if any?
- How did you deal with these challenges or difficulties?
(4) After the starting stage, how did your artistic career develop?
-What kinds of challenges or difficulties did you encounter during this period, if any?
- How did you deal with these challenges or difficulties?

Table 4. Interview guide for art field professionals

Questions
(1) Based on your experience or observation, what is the primary process of art education for fine arts graduates?
- What difficulties do you think fine arts graduates might face during the process of art education?
(2) Based on your experience or observation, how do fine arts graduates develop their artistic careers after university?
- What difficulties do you think fine arts graduates might face after university?

3.3. Data analysis

After data collection, this study adopted the three-level coding method of grounded theory to analyze the interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the first stage—open coding—the researcher labeled the interview transcripts, summarized the meanings of the transcripts, and defined the properties of each code. Through repeated reading and constant comparison, these initial codes were grouped into broader categories. Moreover, through iterative negotiation and discrepancy checking with the intercoder, a high level of consensus was eventually reached.

3.4. Trustworthiness

To ensure data reliability, the study adopted the audit trail method, which records detailed information about the data collection process so that other researchers can track and evaluate the research process (Long & Johnson, 2000). To ensure data credibility, analyst triangulation was used, employing the perspective of another analyst to ensure consistency in data collection and analysis and to avoid potential bias from a single researcher (Patton, 2014). In this study, an intercoder was introduced to verify approximately 11.8% of the data (the interview data from 4 participants out of 34). The results were discussed and negotiated until the most significant possible consensus was achieved (Campbell et al., 2013).

4. Results

4.1. Art training and test

Interviews revealed that the artistic pathway of Chinese graduates often began with training in preparatory classes. Since all students entering art academies are required to pass the art test (Yikao), they typically rely on such training to meet the exam's standards. In this phase, graduates first decided to study fine arts, then undertook preparatory training for the art test. After completing this training, they took the art test required for college admission. This process not only determined access to higher art education but also shaped their early orientation toward art as an exam-driven pursuit (Tay & Zhang, 2025). However, it also introduced a series of pitfalls and challenges, as students' creative development became subordinated to the demands of standardized assessment.

In terms of deciding to study fine arts, the art test fever since the early 2000s, in which students use the art test as a shortcut to get university admission (Chumley, 2016), continues to shape the trajectories of these fine arts graduates. While most interviewees mentioned a long-standing personal interest in drawing and painting since childhood (F1, F3, F4...), some indicated that their decision to study fine arts was primarily driven by the goal of passing the college entrance exam (F2, F5). However, such utilitarian motivation tends to undermine the sustainability of artistic careers. As F4 noted, "They did not really like it in the first place, so many people eventually gave up or changed their career paths."

During the subsequent preparatory training, fine arts students were removed from the regular academic curriculum and instead concentrated on intensive, high-frequency practice of test-specific subjects. Although such training helped them improve their technical skills, which later supported their creative development in art school, the highly repetitive and formulaic realistic training restricted their artistic autonomy. It reduced the inner motivation of fine arts students. As one participant recalled: "During the prep period for the art test, we were in class 12 hours a day, drawing the same things over and over—figures, still lifes. It was just very distorted." (F23)

As for the art test, the main challenge lay in its highly competitive nature and the requirement of both the art test and academic test (Gaokao) scores. Most graduates reported that during art test prep training, their primary goal was to gain admission to an art academy, especially prestigious ones such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) or the China Academy of Art (CAA). Gaining admission to an art academy is widely regarded as an important milestone for fine arts students, especially for those with notable artistic talent and aspirations. However, despite widespread aspirations to enter art academies, many students failed to do so, with several participants attributing their failure to underperformance on the art or academic test (F3, F8). This resulted in some talented or aspiring students failing to enter art academies, which eventually affected their artistic career development.

4.2. Higher art education

In higher art education, students continue their training in fine arts through different courses. However, unlike the highly prescriptive preparatory training, they are given greater autonomy in shaping their learning and creative practice. The curriculum is structured to foster students' aesthetic judgment, technical competence, and creative capacity (Zhu, 2020). It combines foundational realist training, medium-specific techniques, aesthetic and theoretical instruction, and exercises in creative practice. The completion of higher art education is often marked by a graduation exhibition, which serves as both a showcase and an assessment of the students' learning and research outcomes.

However, during their coursework, many graduates felt that they did not receive sufficient support from teachers or courses, particularly in creative practice. One participant noted, "Teachers believed it was time to find your own voice—something they could not teach" (F23), while another

commented, “The courses at school felt pretty useless” (F16). As a result, most of them had to navigate their learning independently, experiencing a prolonged period of exploration and uncertainty. As one participant recalled, “At that time, I did not know what I was doing” (F17), and another reflected, “The question of direction—what should I paint, and which path to follow—took me a long time to figure out” (F29). Lacking sufficient support and facing obstacles in creative practice, students’ work is often perceived as immature even at the final degree show. As F1 recalled, “I had a lot of ideas, but they were not deep enough.”

In addition to challenges in creative practice, another challenge for artistic career development lies in the uneven exposure of degree shows. The graduation exhibitions often serve as a bridge for students to engage with external audiences (Hjelde, 2020). For students at prestigious art academies, graduation exhibitions typically attract greater attention and visibility. Many participants reported receiving opportunities—such as acquisitions or collaborative projects—through their graduation shows. In contrast, graduation exhibitions at less-renowned universities tend to receive limited attention, and students gain fewer opportunities from them. As one participant recalled, “Our school’s graduation exhibition was more like a course presentation. It felt like hardly anyone from outside came to see it” (F3). Such disparities reinforce institutional hierarchies, shaping unequal exposure and access to resources within the art field and influencing students’ early career trajectories.

4.3. Transition after graduation

After graduating from university, fine arts graduates experience a period of transition in which they make critical career choices, leave the supportive environment of art school, and enter the professional art world. For fine arts graduates in China, graduation does not automatically lead to an artistic career. Many graduates initially choose to seek employment or pursue further education to gain a sense of stability or to secure a buffer period. Some experienced a pause in their creative practice, while others continue with their artistic practice, although most struggle to generate sustainable income from art at this early stage.

According to the interview data, whether they can smoothly embark on an artistic career largely depends on the extent of their prior preparation. However, most participants reported that they were not adequately prepared for a career in the arts. First, because universities tend to be relatively closed environments, students often lack exposure to the real art market and operate primarily within the academic evaluation system. Without market awareness, they had little idea how to pursue an artistic career after graduation or how to generate income through art (F17, F24). Furthermore, a bigger challenge for many graduates was that their creative work itself was not yet mature or market-ready. As one graduate described, “Right after graduation, people said my works were too student-like. They were not mature enough, not at the level of a professional artist.” (F3)

Leaving school and entering the art world is a gradual process of becoming independent. However, due to inadequate preparation, graduates often experience confusion and difficulty when facing the loss of support from the academic environment. As one participant recalled, “I wanted to continue creating, but I had no one to tell me whether it was good or not. I could not evaluate it myself” (F1). Despite the difficulties, graduates who persisted in the art world eventually achieved a degree of independence, gradually navigating their artistic careers through self-directed learning and with support from peers and gatekeepers (F14, F18, F16).

4.4. Artistic career path

When entering the artistic career, the career development of fine arts graduates can be roughly divided into three main paths: the independent artist path, the official artist path, and the commercial artist path.

The independent artist path primarily centers on autonomous creation, entering the gallery system, and advancing within it. In developing this path, establishing connections with gatekeepers is the first crucial step, as access to exhibitions and entry into the market largely depends on these interactions. After initial contact with gatekeepers, artists often begin collaborating with galleries. However, the challenges in this path lie in both the accessing and collaboration phases.

Firstly, many graduates noted the difficulty of securing opportunities in the first place. While some graduates were noticed and contacted by gatekeepers through exposure, others adopted more proactive strategies, such as submitting works to competitive open calls (F3, F12). As one participant recalled, “I just kept painting and submitting to every opportunity I could find, but I was rejected over and over” (F3). Then, when they gained opportunities and started collaborating with galleries, graduates faced market-related constraints, limiting their creative autonomy: “Some galleries like artists with a fixed style. If you want to work with them, they expect you to paint a certain way” (F26).

The official artist path typically involves producing works that conform to official thematic requirements, participating in state-sanctioned exhibitions, and advancing in the official system. Careers in this pathway often begin with self-initiated submissions to official exhibitions. After participating in several such exhibitions, artists can apply for membership in art associations that operate on a points-based system, in which participation in official exhibitions allows artists to accumulate credits toward eligibility. The challenges within this path lie in the competitiveness of official exhibitions and the difficulty of marketing.

Specifically, the authority of these exhibitions varies with the credibility of the organizing body: while most artists begin with provincial shows organized by regional institutions, national exhibitions hosted by central bodies carry far greater prestige. Yet because national exhibitions are more demanding and competitive, several interviewees noted that selection requires not only strong skills but also considerable luck (F6, F21). Also, many artists reported that their works attracted little commercial demand, making sales difficult (F14). Broader recognition and meaningful sales opportunities typically emerge only after artists achieve higher status within the system—for example, by holding positions in associations or by repeatedly participating in major exhibitions and winning awards—achievements that are often difficult to secure in the early stages of a career (F30). With limited opportunities to sell artwork, many graduates take full-time institutional employment to secure a stable income (F9, F14).

As for the commercial artist path, in today’s context, it increasingly relies on online exposure. Graduates initially share their work through social media, art-sale websites, or e-commerce platforms to increase visibility. Digital platforms significantly expand the reach of artworks, allowing a broader audience to discover and engage with them. Moreover, audience traffic is closely linked to sales: as traffic grows, opportunities for purchases tend to arise. In this path, audience preferences are closely intertwined with artists’ careers. Therefore, to attract audiences, commercial artists need to take popular taste into account in their creative process, with some undertaking commissioned work to cater to specific audiences’ preferences.

The challenges of this path arise from the precarity of online traffic and the restriction of artistic autonomy. While some artists reported steady growth in both traffic and sales, most emphasized the unpredictability of online attention, which often led to anxiety and self-doubt. As one participant noted, “Sometimes I like a piece a lot, but it still gets ignored. I have no idea why” (F5). Moreover, in

this path, artists' creative decisions are influenced by popular taste (F5, F8). Some artists feel that prevailing aesthetic standards can be restrictive. For example, middle-aged and older clients often prefer conservative or conventional subjects, which can make it difficult for artists to express themselves freely (F9).

The three primary artistic career trajectories discussed above—independent, official, and commercial—are not rigidly separate or mutually exclusive. Instead, these pathways are characterized by both multiplicity and mobility. While many graduates pursue a single trajectory for long-term development, others engage in multiple paths simultaneously or transition between them. Such movements often reflect attempts to balance financial stability with creative autonomy or to access better professional opportunities. For instance, commercial work is frequently utilized to subsidize independent art, as one participant explained: “Doing small commissioned projects and making my own art are two separate paths. The commercial work basically supports my personal, purer creation” (F3). Similarly, success in one arena can be strategically parlayed into another, as noted by an artist who stated, “Once I gain some institutional recognition, I will consider working with galleries” (F14).

4.5. The model of artistic career development of Chinese fine arts graduates

Figure 2 presents the conceptual model of early artistic career development derived from this study. The model illustrates the dynamic and phased nature of Chinese fine arts graduates' career formation, spanning four interrelated phases: (1) art training and test, (2) higher art education, (3) transition after graduation, and (4) artistic career path.

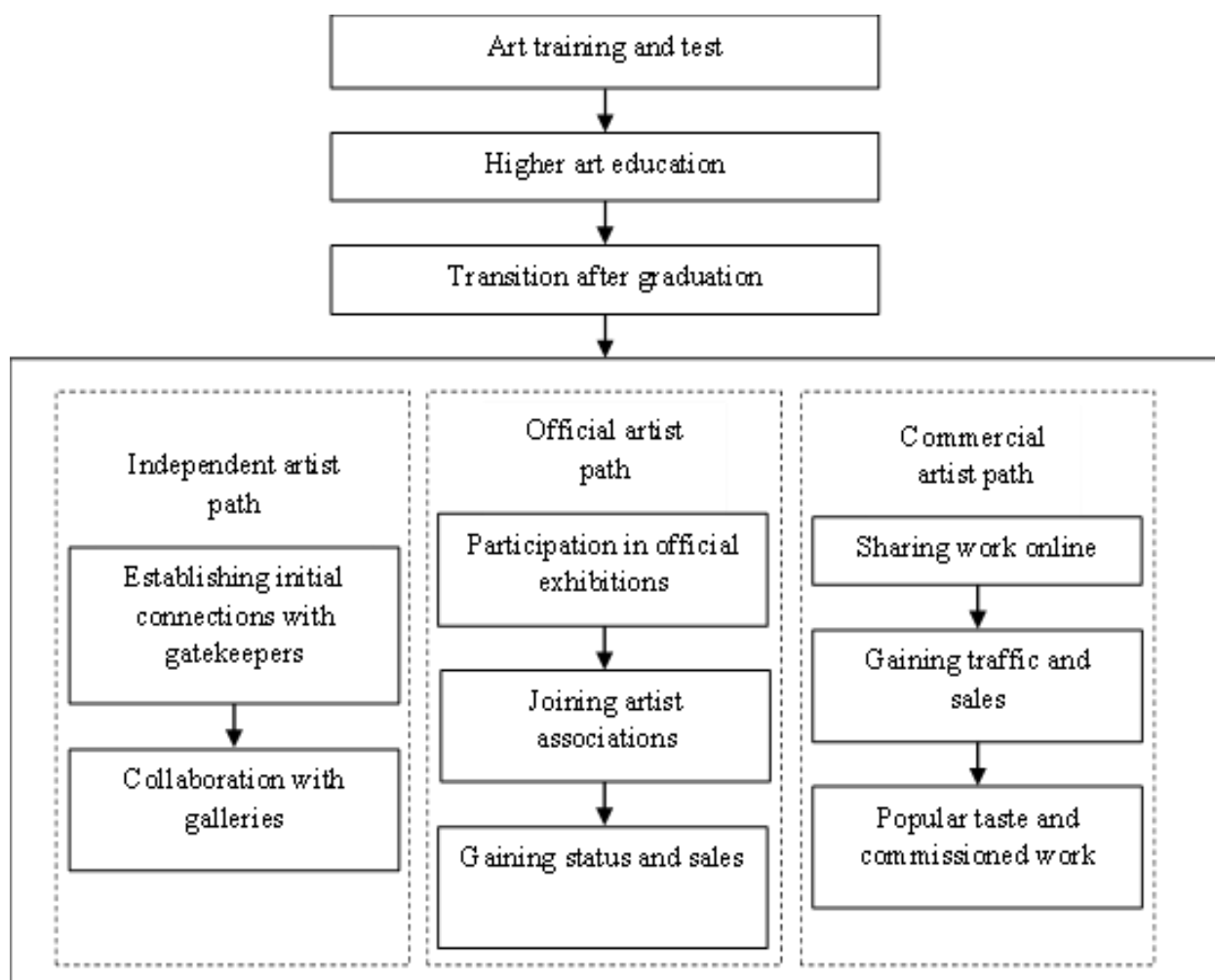


Figure 2. The model of artistic career development of Chinese fine arts graduates

The process begins with early-stage art training and tests, which serve as thresholds for accessing higher art education. At higher art education, students receive professional training in technical skills, art theory, and creative practice. Graduation marks a critical turning point, as institutional support suddenly ends and graduates must navigate the professional art world independently.

Despite similar educational experiences, graduates follow diverse trajectories. Three primary career paths are identified: independent, official, and commercial. Independent artists establish connections with gatekeepers and collaborate with galleries. Official artists advance through exhibitions, accumulate points, and gain association membership; early-stage sales are limited. Commercial artists begin by sharing work online, with sales opportunities growing alongside audience traffic; they often tailor work to popular taste or commission requests.

Also, the dashed frames denote the adaptive mobility between pathways, indicating that graduates can engage in multiple paths simultaneously or transition between them.

5. Discussion

This study applied grounded theory to construct a framework for understanding the early-stage artistic career development of Chinese fine arts graduates. Based on the analysis, the study identified the career pathways pursued by these graduates and the challenges they encounter along the way.

For most graduates, career development begins with the decision to participate in art training and testing. This reflects a standardized model of training and selection, in contrast to the portfolio-based and more individualized admission systems commonly found in Western countries (Tay & Zhang, 2025). Within this selection system, the utilitarian motivation of gaining college admission frequently plays a more dominant role. In Western contexts, intrinsic motivation is often considered more central to the pursuit of an artistic career (Abbing, 2002; Daniel & Johnstone, 2017). Furthermore, preparatory test training is characterized as highly formalized and repetitive skill practice, which constrains the creative expression of fine arts students (Chumley, 2016). Also, the art entrance examination is highly competitive and requires performance in both the art and academic areas. The relative weighting and assessment standards of these two parts remain under continuous adjustment (Changjiang Weekly, 2025). Some scholars have questioned whether such standardized examinations can effectively identify genuinely talented students (Tay & Zhang, 2025).

Regardless of whether in China or other countries, the phase of higher art education is crucial for fine arts students in cultivating creative abilities, which form the fundamental building blocks for developing an artistic career (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020; Sawyer, 2018). However, the study found that for Chinese fine arts students, insufficient support for their creative practice often prolongs the time needed for exploration and results in immature artistic expression, which proves detrimental to their subsequent career development. Previous studies have found that higher art education in China differs from that in Western countries, placing greater emphasis on technical skills than on creative practice, which may negatively impact their career development (He, 2022; Zhu, 2020). Moreover, graduation exhibitions—ideally serving as a bridge between students and the art world (Hjelde, 2020)—often fail to fulfill this function, as they attract significant attention only in prestigious art academies, while exhibitions in other institutions remain largely overlooked.

After graduation, fine arts graduates encounter considerable challenges in transitioning from school to the art world. Western graduates undergo a comparable stage, during which they are frequently considered underprepared for this transition and insufficiently knowledgeable about the art market (Fine, 2017). The difference in China is that, due to obstacles to creative practice at school and a lack of support, graduates' work is often less mature and not market-ready, making this transition more difficult.

In terms of career development, this study identified three distinct pathways: independent, official, and commercial. Previous literature has focused mainly on artistic career pathways within the restricted production field in Western contexts, while paying little attention to pathways in the domain of mass production art (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020). In addition, the official career pathway is one of the distinctive artistic trajectories in China (Liu, 2024).

Unique challenges accompany each pathway. The independent artist path resembles Western patterns, relying on advancement within the gallery system (Lehman & Wickham, 2014; Zanti, 2015), where recognition from gatekeepers is essential but accompanied by significant market pressures. The official artist path, by contrast, depends on participation in state-sponsored exhibitions, which requires approval from expert juries. These opportunities are highly competitive, and official expectations regarding themes and styles constrain creative production. This reflects the impact of the state on artistic autonomy (Alexander, 2018). The commercial path, although characterized by relatively low entry barriers, relies heavily on online platforms. As digital platforms have become increasingly central to the creative industries, they have reshaped emerging models of artistic careers (Bishop, 2023). Nevertheless, the unpredictability of platform algorithms has a considerable impact on the career development of these artists (Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

The findings also reveal that graduates mobilize various resources and strategies to cope with these challenges. This aligns with previous discussions on portfolio and protean careers, in which creative professionals may engage in multiple roles within the creative sector, generate income from various projects, and maintain a high degree of flexibility, leading by their own values and interests (Bridgstock, 2005; Munnelly, 2022).

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the early artistic career development of Chinese fine arts graduates and constructed a grounded framework of career pathways in the Chinese context, revealing the trajectories of these graduates in the early stages and the challenges they encounter. This includes four phases: art training and test, higher art education, transition after graduation, and artistic career path, each accompanied by its own set of challenges. The artistic career path is further divided into three trajectories—independent, official, and commercial—where graduates may pursue one path, multiple paths simultaneously, or switch flexibly between paths.

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of artistic careers beyond Western-dominated scholarship. While previous studies were confined to Western, restricted-production fields, the present study further expands understanding of artistic career development within state-constrained and mass-production domains. Also, the framework extends the literature on higher art education and creative labor in China. Empirically, the conceptual model developed here can serve as a comparative framework for future studies of artistic careers in other cultural contexts. Practically, this study highlights challenges graduates face and the deficiencies in Chinese higher art education and its influence on the artistic career development of Chinese fine arts graduates, offering insights into areas where educational support can be enhanced.

7. Implications for policy and practice

The implications of this study primarily concern higher art education policies and practices.

First, deficiencies in the selection of fine arts students reflect the need for policy improvements. Currently, China is attempting to improve the overall quality of fine arts students through reforms of the entrance examination system (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2023); however, the outcomes of these reforms remain uncertain. It is recommended that selection criteria continue to be refined to identify students with genuine artistic passion. At the same time,

assessment standards should place greater emphasis on creative expression than on technical skills alone.

For higher education institutions, schools should provide enhanced creative support by adjusting curricula and pedagogy. For example, the use of critique-based pedagogies can strengthen students' independent judgment and reflective skills (Klebesadel & Kornetsky, 2023); incorporating more creative practice rather than technical training; and including tutorials within courses can offer students additional guidance and support. In addition, Chinese art schools can enhance career guidance programs or offer entrepreneurship courses (He, 2022; Thom, 2017), thereby providing differentiated training aligned with students' career aspirations.

Additionally, higher education institutions can collaborate more closely with the industry to support the career development of fine arts graduates. For example, collaborations with online platforms or art institutions can help expand exposure for students' exhibitions (Fillis et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2018) and invite practicing professionals to give talks or workshops, thereby strengthening students' connections with the labor market.

8. Suggestion

This study focuses specifically on the visual arts and examines only the early stages of artistic careers. Career trajectories may vary considerably across fields and stages: for example, the market structures and pathways in performing arts or music differ substantially from those in the visual arts, and artists' resources and strategies also evolve significantly in later stages of their careers. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be directly generalized to other domains or career stages. Future research should explore the career development of graduates in other artistic disciplines and examine how career trajectories unfold across different stages of artistic practice.

Declarations

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