



A Study on the Applied Undergraduate Students' "General Skills" from perspective of Ancient "Six Arts" Talent Cultivation Model

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Abstract: In a globalized educational landscape, the cultivation of "general skills" such as communication, critical thinking, and adaptability has become a central focus, particularly in applied undergraduate education. This study explores the potential of integrating the ancient Chinese Six Arts framework—rites, music, archery, chariotry, calligraphy, and mathematics—into modern educational models to address gaps in holistic skill development among applied undergraduate students in China. By drawing on this culturally resonant framework, the study proposes a "General Six Arts" education model, aligning traditional values with contemporary needs to foster ethical awareness, creativity, leadership, and critical reasoning. Through a comprehensive review of literature and an analysis of current practices, the research highlights successes and challenges in skill-based general education in China, offering insights into course design, teaching methodologies, and institutional positioning. This approach emphasizes the balance between technical expertise and transferable skills, promoting student readiness for complex professional and societal roles. The findings underscore the importance of blending traditional wisdom with modern pedagogical strategies to create well-rounded, adaptable graduates prepared for dynamic global challenges.

Keywords: general skills, applied undergraduate education, Six Arts, Confucian education, holistic development, skill-based education,

I. Introduction

In a rapidly changing global landscape, the development of "general skills" has become a cornerstone of higher education, as societies demand graduates who are not only technically competent but also capable of adapting to diverse challenges. Across the world, educational systems emphasize a holistic approach to skill-building, integrating intellectual, practical, and moral development to prepare students for complex professional and societal roles. The focus on general skills, such as communication, critical thinking, and adaptability, reflects the growing recognition of their importance in bridging theoretical knowledge and real-world applications. This global trend calls for innovative frameworks rooted in both contemporary and historical perspectives to enhance skill cultivation in undergraduate education.

China's educational system has similarly embraced the imperative of fostering well-rounded talent, aligning with global practices while integrating cultural heritage.

The Six Arts (六艺, Liù Yì) of ancient China formed the foundation of education during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and beyond, shaping the values and skills of the ideal Confucian gentleman. Designed to foster moral integrity, intellectual capability, and physical prowess, the Six Arts included rites (lǐ), music (yuè), archery (shè), chariotry (yù), calligraphy (shū), and mathematics (shù). This curriculum reflected the Confucian belief that a well-rounded education was essential for personal development and effective governance. By mastering these arts, individuals not only developed practical skills but also cultivated virtues central to maintaining social harmony and hierarchical order [1].

The study of rites (lǐ) emphasized understanding ceremonial practices and social norms to instill respect for tradition and societal structure. Rites were central to Confucianism, promoting the idea that adhering to prescribed behaviors upheld familial and state relationships. Music (yuè), closely linked with rites, was viewed as a means to refine moral character and align human emotions with cosmic harmony. Together, rites and music formed the moral and spiritual core of the Six Arts, reinforcing the connection between personal virtue and societal stability [2].

The physical disciplines of archery (shè) and chariotry (yù) were equally significant. Archery not only developed physical skills and focus but also symbolized moral precision and self-discipline, reflecting a person's ability to "hit the mark" in life and ethics. Chariotry, meanwhile, was essential for military training and ceremonial displays, fostering strategic thinking and coordination. These disciplines prepared individuals for leadership roles in times of peace and conflict, emphasizing both physical fitness and mental acuity [3].

Calligraphy (shū) and mathematics (shù) rounded out the Six Arts, focusing on intellectual and practical development. Calligraphy was regarded as both an administrative necessity and an art form that reflected an individual's inner virtues. Writing with elegance and precision symbolized a harmonious mind. Mathematics, though primarily functional, was vital for governance tasks such as land distribution, tax calculation, and infrastructure projects, underscoring its practical applications in ancient administration [4].

The legacy of the Six Arts endures in the Confucian educational tradition, influencing the structure of the imperial examination system and modern Chinese cultural values. Their emphasis on a balanced education—integrating moral,



intellectual, and physical training—parallels contemporary educational philosophies worldwide. By fostering a holistic approach to learning, the Six Arts exemplify the enduring importance of cultivating versatile individuals capable of contributing to societal stability and progress [5].

Within the context of applied undergraduate education in China, the integration of general skills remains a pressing challenge. As universities focus on producing career-ready graduates, there is a risk of prioritizing technical expertise at the expense of transferable skills and moral grounding. This study posits that the ancient Six Arts model, with its emphasis on comprehensive development, can serve as a valuable reference point for cultivating general skills in modern applied undergraduate programs. By aligning the historical framework with contemporary educational needs, the Six Arts offer a culturally resonant and globally relevant approach to enhancing undergraduate education.

At the local level, applied undergraduate institutions in China have been tasked with addressing regional economic and social needs, requiring graduates who possess both specialized knowledge and versatile skills. However, gaps remain in fostering holistic development among students, particularly in balancing technical proficiency with critical thinking, creativity, and ethical awareness. Leveraging the Six Arts as a guiding framework, this study explores how traditional educational models can inform the cultivation of general skills among applied undergraduate students, addressing these gaps while reinforcing the relevance of cultural heritage in modern education.

II. Literature Review

The cultivation of general skills, also referred to as "soft skills," has become a fundamental goal in education systems worldwide, driven by the demands of a rapidly evolving job market and complex global challenges. Scholars emphasize that skills such as critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and teamwork are essential not only for employability but also for fostering innovation and lifelong learning [6]. Educational models globally have evolved to incorporate these competencies, moving away from content-heavy curricula toward experiential and interdisciplinary learning approaches [7]. Initiatives such as the European Tuning Project and the 21st Century Skills Framework have been instrumental in integrating general skills into academic programs, highlighting their importance in personal and professional success [8].

Research in China has increasingly aligned with global trends in skill development, with a strong emphasis on integrating cultural and historical perspectives into modern education. Traditional Chinese education, deeply rooted in Confucianism, historically emphasized holistic development, balancing moral, intellectual, and practical growth. This legacy has prompted scholars to revisit frameworks like the Six Arts (Liù Yì), which have long been recognized for their comprehensive approach to education [9]. The Six Arts model, originating in the Zhou Dynasty, offers a multifaceted approach to talent cultivation through rites (lǐ), music (yuè), archery (shè), charioteering (yù), calligraphy (shū), and mathematics (shù), emphasizing the integration of ethical, physical, and intellectual training [10].

The Six Arts model has been the subject of extensive study, with its six components serving distinct but interconnected purposes. Rites (lǐ) were seen as foundational for social harmony, instilling respect for tradition and societal norms [11]. Music (yuè), on the other hand, was believed to refine emotions and align individuals with cosmic order, emphasizing the interplay between personal morality and universal harmony [12]. Physical disciplines such as archery (shè) and charioteering (yù) were valued for developing discipline, physical strength, and strategic thinking, traits essential for both military and ceremonial roles [13]. Calligraphy (shū) and mathematics (shù) complemented these with intellectual and practical training, cultivating precision, creativity, and problem-solving abilities [14].

Contemporary research has explored the application of the Six Arts in modern education, highlighting its relevance in addressing gaps in holistic development. The ethical and moral dimensions of rites and music have been linked to modern efforts to promote emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and ethical reasoning among students [15]. Physical disciplines like archery have inspired innovations in physical education, emphasizing their role in fostering discipline and leadership qualities [16]. Calligraphy, celebrated as both an art form and a cognitive exercise, has been identified as a means of enhancing creativity and mindfulness, while mathematics continues to be central to logical reasoning and analytical thinking [17].

Challenges in cultivating general skills within applied undergraduate education in China are well-documented. Many programs prioritize technical proficiency to meet industry demands but often neglect broader competencies such as adaptability, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills [18]. Scholars have argued that the Six Arts framework can serve as a culturally resonant model to address these gaps. By integrating its principles into modern curricula, institutions can foster a balance between specialized knowledge and transferable skills, preparing graduates to navigate both local and global complexities [19].

Efforts to modernize the Six Arts framework have gained traction in recent years. Researchers suggest that incorporating elements of rites and music into modern humanities curricula can enrich students' ethical and cultural understanding [20]. Physical disciplines like archery have been adapted to include activities that promote mental focus and team collaboration, aligning with contemporary pedagogical goals [21]. Innovations in calligraphy instruction, such as digital platforms, have demonstrated its relevance in developing fine motor skills and artistic expression [22]. The mathematical component, already embedded in STEM education, continues to evolve to emphasize problem-solving and interdisciplinary applications [23].

Studies have highlighted the potential of the Six Arts framework to inform global education reform, offering a balance of traditional values and modern competencies. Researchers argue that this approach provides a robust framework for developing general skills in diverse educational contexts, reinforcing the importance of moral grounding alongside intellectual and practical training [24]. This study builds on these findings to examine the applicability of the Six Arts model in fostering general skills among applied undergraduate students in China, contributing to the broader discourse on

holistic education and its global implications [25].

III. Current Status of Skill-based General Education Courses in China

Skill-based general education in China has gained significant momentum over the past decade, reflecting a broader shift in the country's higher education landscape toward fostering holistic, competency-driven learning. This shift stems from the need to prepare graduates for the demands of a globalized economy, where success depends not only on technical expertise but also on soft skills like critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and adaptability. Despite growing efforts, the current state of these programs reveals a mixture of achievements, persistent challenges, and substantial potential for future growth.

Evolution of Skill-Based General Education

China's journey toward skill-based general education has been shaped by both internal and global influences. The late 1990s marked a pivotal moment when universities began to prioritize broad intellectual development, offering courses in humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Over time, this approach expanded to include skills that could help students navigate the complexities of modern life and work. The release of the Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) formalized this vision, emphasizing the importance of producing versatile and innovative talents equipped to address real-world challenges.

Unlike the early days when general education courses were seen as supplementary, there is now a growing recognition that these programs are central to a student's overall education. This evolution reflects an acknowledgment that cognitive flexibility, ethical reasoning, and practical competencies are as crucial as disciplinary knowledge in an increasingly interconnected world.

Implementation and Structure

Today, skill-based general education is a staple in most Chinese universities, often embedded as part of the core curriculum. Students are introduced to courses designed to develop critical skills in areas such as problem-solving, public speaking, teamwork, and digital literacy. Notable institutions like Tsinghua University and Peking University have taken the lead, integrating interdisciplinary learning modules with traditional Chinese cultural values, such as Confucian ethics and moral reasoning, to provide a well-rounded education.

Beyond the traditional classroom, many universities are embracing innovative teaching practices. Project-based learning, case studies, role-playing exercises, and other experiential methods are increasingly common, offering students opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. Furthermore, digital tools are gradually being incorporated to make skill-based education more interactive and accessible, although the pace of adoption varies widely across regions and institutions.

Achievements

The progress in skill-based general education has been marked by notable successes. More universities now recognize the importance of general skills, allocating significant resources to curriculum development and teacher training. Collaborations with industries and international educational institutions have enriched these programs, ensuring their alignment with evolving job market needs. Active learning techniques, such as group projects and problem-solving workshops, are gaining traction, offering students hands-on experiences that build critical competencies.

These efforts are paying off. Graduates equipped with general skills are more competitive in the job market, better able to adapt to diverse professional environments, and more confident in tackling real-world problems. Moreover, the incorporation of interdisciplinary courses has introduced students to broader perspectives, encouraging innovative thinking and cultural awareness.

Challenges

Despite these advancements, skill-based general education in China faces several hurdles. One major issue is the lingering dominance of exam-oriented teaching. This traditional approach prioritizes rote memorization and test performance over the development of critical and creative thinking skills. As a result, many students miss out on the deeper engagement and exploration that general education courses are designed to promote.

Additionally, disparities in the quality and availability of skill-based courses persist. Elite universities often boast well-funded, comprehensive programs, while smaller or less-resourced institutions struggle to offer comparable opportunities. Furthermore, students frequently perceive general education courses as secondary to their major studies, leading to low motivation and limited participation. Faculty resistance to interdisciplinary methods and the reliance on outdated curricula also pose significant barriers to progress.

Opportunities for Development

Despite these challenges, China's ongoing emphasis on education reform provides a promising pathway for strengthening skill-based general education. One compelling avenue for growth lies in drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese education frameworks, such as the Six Arts, which emphasize a balance of moral, intellectual, and practical training. By incorporating these culturally resonant models, universities can create curricula that feel both relevant and meaningful to students.

Technology also holds great potential for transforming skill-based education. Online platforms, virtual simulations, and interactive digital tools can bridge regional disparities, making high-quality general education accessible to students across the country. Collaboration with industries and global academic partners can further enhance these programs by providing real-world context and opportunities for experiential learning.

IV. Discussion on Cultivating General Skills in Applied Undergraduate Students

4.1. Institutional Positioning of Applied Undergraduate Colleges

Applied undergraduate colleges occupy a unique and crucial space within the broader spectrum of higher education in China. These institutions are primarily dedicated to undergraduate education, with their mission intricately tied to serving local economic and social development. The central aim of such colleges is to nurture advanced applied talents—individuals who possess the practical skills and theoretical grounding required to meet societal demands.

Unlike research-intensive universities, applied undergraduate colleges align their talent cultivation efforts with the immediate needs of the workforce. This alignment emphasizes a dual focus: providing a strong foundation in relevant academic disciplines while equipping students with specialized skills tailored to real-world applications. Applied talents are not typically involved in pure academic research; instead, they excel in translating theoretical knowledge into practical solutions, guided by solid conceptual frameworks. As a result, these institutions produce graduates who are particularly well-suited for roles that require innovative thinking and hands-on problem-solving in professional settings.

4.2. On Cultivating General Skills in Applied Undergraduate Talents

The cultivation of general skills in applied undergraduate students is a multifaceted endeavor that complements the mission of applied colleges. By addressing societal needs and institutional goals, these skills are designed to prepare students for a dynamic job market and lifelong learning. Below are key areas where general skills cultivation can be effectively implemented:

Artistic Skills

Artistic skills play a vital role in promoting the well-rounded development of students, contributing to their creativity, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence. Applied undergraduate colleges, while limited by resources and practical constraints, can prioritize simple yet meaningful artistic abilities such as basic singing, folk dance, and calligraphy. These activities not only enhance personal expression but also provide students with cultural literacy and interpersonal confidence, enriching their lives and making them more adaptable to diverse social and professional environments.

Etiquette and Protocol

In professional and social settings, applied undergraduate students often excel due to their strong practical abilities. Proficiency in etiquette and protocol becomes an invaluable asset, enabling them to navigate social interactions with confidence and cultural sensitivity. Students who understand the requirements and implementation of etiquette in various contexts—such as business meetings, public events, and community activities—are better equipped to build trust, foster collaboration, and contribute meaningfully to team dynamics.

Linguistic Proficiency

Effective communication is at the heart of professional success, making linguistic proficiency a cornerstone of general skills education. This includes both verbal and written communication, equipping students with the ability to articulate ideas clearly, engage in persuasive public speaking, and create well-structured written documents. Enhanced linguistic skills not only improve employability but also enable students to excel in roles that demand cross-functional collaboration, client interaction, or leadership responsibilities.

Physical Fitness

Physical fitness transcends traditional physical education by focusing on cultivating students' long-term commitment to health and well-being. This involves teaching them to develop independent exercise habits and fostering an awareness of active lifestyles. A physically fit individual enjoys higher energy levels, better stress management, and improved mental clarity, all of which contribute to professional productivity and personal fulfillment. Encouraging fitness as a general skill prepares students to adapt to the demands of their careers while maintaining a balanced and healthy life.

Marketing Skills

In the context of China's socialist market economy, marketing skills have become increasingly relevant for applied undergraduate students. A foundational understanding of marketing theories, strategies, and processes allows graduates to contribute effectively to business operations. These skills help students develop entrepreneurial thinking, refine their ability to analyze market needs, and organize successful marketing campaigns. By cultivating marketing proficiency, applied colleges prepare students to pursue diverse career paths in enterprise settings or entrepreneurial ventures.

Management Abilities

Management is a versatile skill set that encompasses managing teams, projects, and oneself. Applied undergraduate students who learn the principles and methods of management gain practical tools for navigating organizational complexities. These skills enhance their ability to adapt to leadership roles, improve decision-making, and foster innovation within their professional domains. Management abilities not only serve as an auxiliary skill complementing students' technical expertise but also empower them to take on independent managerial roles as they advance in their careers.

V. Application of the "General Six Arts" Education Model

The "General Six Arts" education model, rooted in ancient Chinese traditions, offers a holistic approach to skill cultivation that emphasizes moral, intellectual, and practical development. This model, encompassing ritual (li), music (yue), archery (she), chariotry (yu), calligraphy (shu), and mathematics (shu), can be adapted to modern educational contexts, especially in applied undergraduate institutions, to nurture versatile and competent graduates. The application of this model provides a structured framework for integrating general skills into the curriculum, aligning with contemporary needs while preserving cultural heritage.

5.1. Ritual (Li): Cultivating Ethical Awareness and Professionalism

The principle of li underscores the importance of ethics, etiquette, and interpersonal harmony. In a modern educational

setting, this translates into fostering students' ethical awareness, social responsibility, and professional conduct. Applied undergraduate colleges can integrate courses and workshops on professional ethics, cross-cultural communication, and workplace etiquette to instill these values. Through experiential learning, such as role-playing and case studies, students can practice navigating real-world situations with integrity and respect for diverse cultural and professional norms.

5.2. Music (Yue): Enhancing Creativity and Emotional Intelligence

Music in the Six Arts symbolizes harmony and emotional expression. Its modern counterpart involves nurturing creativity, cultural appreciation, and emotional intelligence. Colleges can incorporate artistic and cultural activities, such as music appreciation, performing arts, and creative workshops, into the curriculum. These activities not only enhance students' ability to think innovatively but also help them develop emotional resilience and teamwork skills, which are essential in both professional and personal contexts.

5.3. Archery (She): Developing Focus and Goal-oriented Discipline

Archery in the Six Arts represents precision, concentration, and goal-setting. In contemporary education, this can be interpreted as fostering self-discipline, focus, and strategic planning. Applied undergraduate programs can achieve this through initiatives like project-based learning, where students set measurable goals and work collaboratively to achieve them. Incorporating competitive sports and structured extracurricular activities further reinforces perseverance, precision, and teamwork, equipping students to tackle challenges methodically.

5.4. Chariotry (Yu): Building Adaptability and Leadership Skills

Chariotry symbolizes the ability to navigate complex systems and coordinate actions. Modern application focuses on cultivating leadership, adaptability, and decision-making skills. Colleges can achieve this by offering courses in organizational behavior, strategic management, and conflict resolution. Students can also participate in simulation exercises, internships, and community engagement projects, providing them with hands-on experiences that develop their ability to lead effectively in dynamic environments.

5.5. Calligraphy (Shu): Refining Communication and Cultural Identity

Calligraphy in the Six Arts embodies mastery of communication and cultural heritage. This can be applied today by emphasizing linguistic proficiency, both in written and verbal forms, and fostering cultural literacy. Applied undergraduate programs can offer writing workshops, public speaking courses, and activities that explore cultural traditions. These efforts enhance students' ability to articulate ideas clearly and persuasively while deepening their understanding of cultural identity and expression.

5.6. Mathematics (Shu): Enhancing Analytical and Problem-solving Skills

Mathematics in the Six Arts represents logic, analysis, and precision. In a modern context, it corresponds to cultivating critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and problem-solving abilities. Institutions can integrate courses on data literacy, financial planning, and systems thinking to help students approach problems analytically. Case studies and real-world projects can further enhance their ability to apply quantitative and logical reasoning in professional scenarios.

VI. Course Requirements and Selection Methods

Based on the attributes of skill-based general education courses, teaching management is generally assigned to the academic department responsible for public courses. In addition to routine teaching management, this includes creating course plans, developing syllabi, selecting instructors, calculating the number of classes required, and organizing student course selection.

6.1. Course Requirements

Courses under the "General Six Arts" framework should be offered and assessed within the first four semesters, following the course categories outlined in the Talent Cultivation Plan. For each of the "Six Arts," there should be at least two courses available in each category. The number of students per class, scheduling, and weekly contact hours must comply with the relevant regulations of the institution.

6.2. Course Selection Methods

Students choose courses based on the specific time and location of the "Six Arts" offerings, considering their individual circumstances. It is mandatory for students to complete a minimum of two credits in each "Art." Courses for which credits have already been earned cannot be reselected, and courses with additional prerequisites require students to meet the necessary conditions. Additionally, courses overlapping with major requirements are not eligible for selection, though advanced-level courses are exempt from major restrictions.

6.3. Instructor Selection

The selection of instructors for "General Six Arts" courses should prioritize those with strong professional expertise and practical skills. A faculty team combining full-time and part-time instructors should be established. Institutions are encouraged to support and recruit qualified internal faculty from relevant departments to teach these courses. Furthermore, the institution may consider hiring skilled external instructors with practical experience, even if they do not meet conventional hiring criteria.

Conclusion

In the evolving landscape of higher education and employment, the debate over whether university majors should be chosen based on job prospects underscores a critical truth: regardless of their chosen field, students must eventually integrate into society and contribute to social production, management, and services. For applied undergraduate students, this integration requires not only specialized knowledge but also a robust foundation of general skills that enable adaptability, collaboration, and innovation.

While professional expertise forms the backbone of their competencies, the role of general skills in the workplace cannot be understated. In many scenarios, the application of professional skills might represent only a fraction of their responsibilities, with general knowledge and skills often proving decisive. These skills serve a dual purpose: complementing their technical abilities within their specialization and functioning as standalone capabilities that open diverse employment opportunities. The introduction of the "General Six Arts" model into public course teaching represents a progressive step in bridging this gap. By blending traditional wisdom with modern educational needs, this approach equips students with comprehensive skills that enhance their employability and adaptability. It prepares them not only for immediate employment but also for navigating the complexities of career shifts and lifelong learning across various stages of life.

Ultimately, the reform of public courses through the "General Six Arts" framework reflects a forward-thinking commitment to holistic education. Its success lies in its ability to balance professional and general skills, fostering graduates who are not only capable of excelling in their careers but also of contributing meaningfully to society in dynamic and transformative ways. This model, deeply rooted in cultural heritage and attuned to contemporary needs, offers a promising path for applied undergraduate education to cultivate versatile, resilient, and socially responsive talents.

Acknowledgement: This study is approved and supported by College Research Project titled 'Research on the Cultivation of General Skills in Applied Undergraduate Colleges' at Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts And Sciences, with project number 202233.

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