

Implementing Cultural Identity in Global Perspective through Contemporary Art: Study Case of “THROUGH” Workshop in Beijing, China

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Abstract: Focused on the stance of culture in global perspective, this paper aimed to develop awareness in contemporary society. Young generations nowadays immerse on technology and are mostly influenced by social media, they become the victims of globalization. This issue has been reflected in many aspects, including art and design. As educators, researchers try to find a method and solution to build understanding about the importance of cultural identity. THROUGH workshop offered a new mindset that could be a sample and study case to create mutual understanding between art, design, and culture, and how to present these aspects globally. Students could learn about Chinese cultural contexts and try to relate it with global issues through their artwork. Students focused on Chinese military rank badges as their main topic. They did their research based on colours, symbols, and shapes. The final outcome was splendid not only from its visual aspects but also from its cultural contexts. This artwork managed to represent Chinese identity in contemporary perspective that can be present in global communities. Thus, this workshop acts as an experimental project that can encourage young generation to explore more about their identity and implement their knowledge in global perspective through their artwork.

1 INTRODUCTION

The vast development of our contemporary world has influenced our society in various aspects. Globalization has caused culture and traditions are slowly disappeared from our daily life. Modern people have been through these aspects without realizing their importance. This state has been reflected in many fields including art and design. Understanding tradition can be a good start to preserve our cultural identity in global perspective.

THROUGH workshop aimed to bring up this issue and instigated a new mindset for young generation, especially art and design students. It was a workshop that focus on developing awareness, especially for these students who live in contemporary era. By understanding Chinese cultural contexts and try to relate it with global issues. The final outcomes of this workshop will bring us into a series of artifacts that come from mutual

understanding between students who worked together as a team for almost 3 weeks. Coming from different mindset and personalities, they did through research and applied it to their artwork.

This research was based on a study case from the workshop, it had developed a new way of basic research in design process and also gave opportunity for students to experience working in team. Each phase of research was guided by instructors, students were allowed to discuss their ideas so that they could create concept and produce the artwork. When the concept was made, they presented it to the guest lecturer who was hosted this workshop and to their instructors as well. Afterwards, they got feedback to continue their ideas into the final artwork.

2 METHODS

This paper was focused on the relation between cultural context and historical content, which by its nature acted as theoretical knowledge, that later will be combined with practical skill through experimental art in interdisciplinary perspective. This research also applied practice based research and constructivist learning as its methods. Practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. "Practice-based" or "practice-led" research: a research that is initiated by practice and carried out through practice (Adams, 2010). As what Schon had mentioned in his book, practice-led research reflects a change in emphasis in research from research about the Visual Arts and artists, designers, craftspersons (as subject), predominantly carried out by critics, theoreticians, historians, etc., to a more pro-active research model involving practitioners researching through action and reflecting in and on action (Malins, 1995). The different approaches to describing and interpreting art constitute the so-called methodologies of artistic analysis (Schon, 1983). Thus, by undertaking the experimental art projects in contemporary perspective and using theoretical frameworks as their approach, researchers intended to apply new methodologies that could reflect multi-discipline subjects in Visual Arts and Communication Design studies. This project integrated practical subjects such as illustration, paper craft, and color theory with theoretical subjects such as Chinese history and interpreted them through contemporary perspective so that it could represent Chinese cultural contexts in global scale.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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A workshop is a period of discussion or practical work on a particular subject in which a group of people share their knowledge or experience. THROUGH workshop was held at Gengdan Academy of Design, Beijing, China, on December 2017. Hosted by guest lecturer from Indonesia, this workshop was participated by 60-70 students,

majoring in Visual Communication Design, for around three weeks and was supported by 5 lecturers from China and Indonesia as their instructors. The workshop brief was given in advance along with the timetable and deadline, the students were suggested not to think about the final outcomes first since they needed to focus on finding ideas and following research process before developing their artworks. Since Chinese culture and tradition were the main idea of this workshop, students needed to find the answer of 5W (who, what, where, when, why) and 1H (how) so that they could breakdown their creative thinking before continue to decide what would be the main topic that they wanted to develop. The students started their research by collecting data and information from many sources, such as books, online literature, and documentation. They also conducted interview and gathering more materials by doing direct observation in museum and gallery.

Direct observation and data collection in was conducted at CAFA (Central Academy of Fine Arts) Art Museum in Beijing. The museum has become a platform for the exchange of Chinese and foreign art, as well as to provide a space for visit, study and exhibition to CAFA faculties and students, the public, domestic and foreign artists (Capital Museum *Exhibition*, 2018). By visiting the museum, students had good opportunity to observe the development of contemporary art in China, either from local or foreign artists, which also become an opportunity to see the response to art communities in digital era.

Afterwards, the students were guided to visit Beijing Capital Museum in order to do further exploration about Chinese culture and tradition. The general collections of this museum are mostly consist of Chinese cultural heritage and artefacts, they are chronologically displayed to inform visitors about historical development in Beijing i.e. some collections that show artefacts from primitive residence place to the formation of a polis, from a political center of North China to a united multi-ethnic feudal state, and to the capital of the People's Republic of China (Cafa Museum, 2018). Students gathered data and information from various sources, especially for literature, they used both online and offline sources. For online research, students used *Baidu* as the main search engine to collect their data. Actually it is the first and best Chinese search engine that enables users to search millions of information and images on the internet. *Baidu* is similar to Google and offers similar products and services, it also censors search result and other content based on Chinese regulation (Investopedia, 2018). Gathering data and information through online resources is very

beneficial for students. They only need to search specific keywords and they get information immediately. They still need to analyse and interpret it afterwards, but it does save time. During the workshop, the students learned that they had to be responsible with the sources they chose and how they used it as references for their research.

This paper will focus on one out of ten groups that had participated THROUGH workshop in Beijing, China. This group selected Chinese traditional clothing as one of significance cultural aspect as their main topic. The students employed this knowledge as their inspiration and ideas to develop artworks in contemporary perspective. Working in group, students had to do lots of discussion and which direction they wanted to go for this research. Each dynasty had its own uniqueness and characteristics of their military clothing or uniform that could be explored further during the research process. Those characteristics could represent specific cultural identity for each dynasty. The group found out that during Ming and Qing Dynasties in China, important person always put on splendid colours, gold threads and specific patterns on their chest and back side of clothing or robes to show their rank badges. There were two categories of men who achieved badges, civil and military. Each category had nine ranks. Whereas the civil badges were featuring birds for their symbols of identification, the military ranks were featuring animals, both real and mythological, as the identification symbols. There were minor differences between the symbols from Ming and Qing Dynasty. Later, in late Qing Dynasty, the rules about clothing became more irrepresible (The Journal of Antique and Collectibles, 2018). Thus, based on these early findings, the group continued their research and focused on symbolisation of Chinese military-rank badges, especially from Qing Dynasty. Military-rank badges were represented by specific colours on the background and animals symbols above the colours. Robes colours, helmets, and armours were the items that had been used as the main resources by the students in order to gather information about Chinese military ranks. The badges were put on the front and back of the ceremonial robes of courts officials to indicate their ranks in both the civil and military services (Wyatt, 2008).

The first step of students' research was to find out more about the history of military rank badges, the symbols of each animal, and the interpretation of each colour on badges as well. The military rank badges were first introduced during the Ming period in 1391, specifically from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Afterwards, the court

clothing regulations were published in 1652 and revised by Qianlong Emperor in 1759. Rank badges worn by court officials to signify their status in civil or military sphere. There were two badges attached to the clothing, one on the back and the other on the front, it was divided on purpose in order to allow the garment to be buttoned up on the front side. The students had to select several decorative pattern that could be applied on the lantern to illustrate the clear ranks of military officer during the ancient time. Military badges were easier to identify since they were represented by different animals. The main indicator of time periods in military rank-badges were the background images of animal symbols, such as water or cloud, since this background were able to indicate the trend around that time (Turong, 2014). Rank badges were produced by imperial workshops, but for the higher rank badge is made by females of the household in embroidery. In Qing Dynasty, military badges were moved to outer garment while in Ming Dynasty, it was displayed on the court robe. The late Qing Dynasty (1652-1911) have nine ranks that represented by different animals (Sarajo, 2018).

The first rank was represented by *Qilin* as the symbol. It is Chinese mythical creature just like the dragon and phoenix, and sometimes *Qilin* is written as kilin or kylin. This mythical creature is believed as the symbol of serenity and prosperity. *Qilin* is a composite creature with a deer's body and wolf's forehead, has two horns, an ox's tail, horse's hooves, also five-coloured. *Qilin* is lively, intelligent and gentle, but valorous to ward off devils (Chinasage, 2016). *Qilin* is powerful, benevolent, and auspicious, thus it is suitable to be the highest rank for animal representatives. Lion was applied to represent the second rank of military officer in ancient China, especially from Qing Dynasty. The lion symbolises protection, harmony, blessings, and high rank. Animals on military badges were always illustrated with specific gestures and expression i.e. opened mouths, perhaps to emphasise their ferocity. Lions were conventionally shown with curled tails, manes, and back hair that distinguished them from the representations of bears (The Pacific Asia Museum, 2008). Lion also represents bravery, suitable its rank as the son of the dragon in Chinese mythology. The third military rank was symbolised by Leopard. It was illustrated with the body facing one direction and the head turning to face over its shoulder in the opposite direction. It was found in mythology that leopard's head face toward the sun disk to represent the emperor. Military men wanted the animals on their badges to face the emperor as a sign of respect (Denver Art Museum, 2018). Leopard's rank is

higher than the tiger's, it also represent bravery and speed. Tiger was believed as a symbol of courage and ferocity. These characteristics were valued in military world. In China, tiger was also considered as a superior being that could protect human against evil forces. Therefore, this animal was often illustrated on clothing and accessories for young children (Sarajo, 2018). Tiger is a wild animal that represent the force, king of animal, a symbol of good faith and ferocity.

Bear on rank badges was not represented bear as wild animal in nature. It often featured in disheveled manes, emphasising on its paws and extended tail. Bear represented the fifth symbol in military ranks and it was selected because of its supernatural power in ancient Chinese mythology (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000). Bear is considered as a larger animal that represent manliness, masculinity, fierce, and a great strength. Panther, was also considered as ferocious animal, a cruel predator in Chinese mythology. During the Ming Dynasty's period, panther was identified as the sixth and seventh of rank badges in military, but later in 1759, during the Qing Dynasty's period, it was replaced by Rhinoceros as a symbol of the seventh-rank officer (Welch, 2013). Panther is characterised as a young tiger with atocity, tough and inexorability. The seventh and eighth ranks of Qing Dynasty's military badges were represented by Rhinoceros. It was not the same with rhinoceros in real nature, instead the name rhinoceros was translated from ancient Chinese mythological creature *Xiniu*. Another translation of *xiniu* would be an *auspicious ox* (Bates, 2008). Rhinoceros represents a weapon, an armour with incisive and boisterous characteristics.

Last but not least, Seahorse, an interesting creature that represented the ninth rank of military badges. For low rank officers, holding this badge was considered as a great honour. When they passed away, their military clothing was buried together with them since it was a significant tribute of their lifetime. Thus, it was hard to find the evidence of the seahorse rank badges because most of them were concealed or hidden with the deceased body of the military officers in the tombs (The Journal of Antique and Collectibles, 2018). Seahorse is an amphibious double line creature, it has a mysterious, brace, battle wise and have commanding ability.



Figure 1. Early sketch symbols of military rank-badges on lantern design



Figure 2. The shape of *Bagua* from ancient Chinese symbols.

On Figure 1, the group presented early ideas of their artworks. They focused on the colours of clothing from each military rank as background and the helmet form as the main structures of their lantern design. There were nine ranks in military, but in total actually there were eight animals or creatures that symbolised the rank badges. On the top of lanterns, students created shape that imitate the military helmet. Their original idea was to place or hang the lanterns the highest rank on the top and the lowest rank badges at the lower level.

However, after further discussion with the guest lecturer and instructors, they were suggested to combine all small lanterns into one big lantern to represent the 'wholeness' and 'unity' of ideas. Therefore, they created one big lantern with eight sides or surfaces, and the final form of their artwork would be a combination between *Bagua* from ancient Chinese symbols and the military helmet. *Bagua* (also called *Pa Kua*) is an 8-sided shape that is made of 8 trigrams (Figure 2). 'Ba' means eight and 'gua' means areas or sections; collectively *Bagua* refers to a group of eight symbols that have specific meaning

in the Chinese philosophy. The *Bagua* symbol is also a traditional *Feng Shui* too (Ancient-Symbols, 2018).

After finalised their ideas, students started to implement their concept into design. At this phase, the group managed to interpret their ideas and translate the rank badges, symbols, and colours into other shape and size. Students delivered their critical and creative thinking through their design concepts and started to developing their artwork. Further discussion continued and focused on technical matters such as the choice of materials, artwork display, and size of the lantern. They did more discussion within the group members and consultation with guest lecturer and instructors to find the answers of their questions. All participants worked together as a team and they tried to find the solutions of some issues that might come out during their design process.



Figure 3. Tracing and visualising the image of mythological creature from each military rank.

The next phases were to start preparing the materials and implementing their ideas into the real artwork. Tracing and crafting the symbols on paper were the next step before continuing to construct the structure of big lantern. The final outcome of the group was a big octagonal shape lantern in 60x60x90cm size. The lantern was placed on the top of pedestal and lighting was installed inside of lantern to emphasise the silhouette of each animal and the background colour of each military rank. It also put the basic function of lantern as an artificial lighting.



Figure 4. Big Lantern in octagonal shape showing eight mythological animals that represent military rank-badges.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The case study that researchers had delivered to students through practice-based method and interdisciplinary approach had shown satisfactory outcomes in general. Students' response of this project was good and they realised the importance of teamwork and research process in order to create good design. By understanding the Chinese cultural contexts, they could develop interesting ideas for their design that represent cultural identity. They also managed to relate several subjects into their own background research, like Illustration, Paper Crafting, and Colour Theory, which then could be interpreted in contemporary perspective. This project allowed them to understand about the unity of learning subjects in Visual Communication Design and Contemporary Art Practice. Thus, this experimental project can become a new method that can encourage young generation, especially design students, to implement their understanding about cultural identity in global perspective through their artwork.

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