

Fostering Creative Competency and Value between China and Australia via Multi-Disciplinary and Cross-Cultural Design Workshops

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Abstract

This paper discusses ways of fostering people-to-people connections in the creative industries between Australia and China, through a series of multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural workshops and exhibitions in both countries to engage creative practitioners and companies to foster partnerships and to increase cultural awareness amongst students in the areas of arts, design and health. Not only is China a leading exporter in the global market, it is also a rising importer of cultural products and services. A burgeoning middle class is boosting up creative consumption. China's government is shifting its policy focus from "made in China" to "created in China". As a result, Chinese governments and industries are actively engaging overseas partners for collaboration to pursue a new configuration of value.

With the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement, Australian creative practitioners are well placed to engage with China specifically in the area of design for health and the aged population. An imbalanced ageing population is a growing concern not only in China but also globally and designers are well placed to create new design solutions to address concerns in the area of care services, urban environments and products for healthy ageing. However, the lack of knowledge about local language, culture and business practice presents a major barrier for Western companies and students to reach the potential of Chinese opportunities. To address this barrier, this paper reflects on a series of workshops and exhibitions via a partnership between the UC Cross-Cultural Design Lab, Cheung Kong School of Art and Design, the South China Agricultural University, South China Normal University, Guangxi Arts University, Shantou University, and Monash University. Another layer of the workshop program is connecting Australian and Chinese creative practitioners with students and practitioners in the area of Health Sciences. This type of multi-disciplinary collaboration can bring about new knowledge and understanding of each other's' respective cultures and give them skills on how to work together effectively from the perspective of different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds. The ultimate goal of this paper is to introduce ways of working between cultures to create objects, designed environments and new services that will be of value to a global audience to stimulate new areas of creative production between cultures.

Key words: creative industries, cross-cultural art and design, China, Australia, value

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Introduction

The “Creative Economy” has become a buzz word representing a range of different working environments and methods of production. It often references traditional ‘creative areas’ such as design, architecture, fine arts – areas of ‘cultural production.’ The current definition of ‘creative economy’ can sometimes negate the possibilities for creative outputs that happen within other fields in which creative practitioners are often ‘embedded’ but not necessarily identified as ‘creative practitioners’ in these areas. Especially with the advent of smart technologies, the health science is an area that is rife with creative production however there are still many boundaries in creating seamless flows between the creative arts and health sciences. We therefore set out to create bridges between these areas through overseas study programs. Since 2015, we have used a series of study tour workshops as a vehicle, not only to increase students’ cultural intelligence, work in multi-disciplinary teams and enhance their work-ready skills but also to create a forum to find new and innovative solutions to world problems. During the tour, Australian students worked in teams with Chinese students to create quick creative solutions to complex problems. In a series of Cross Cultural Design for Healthy Ageing workshops and exhibitions, design thinking methods were used with cross-cultural participants as a means to find cross-cultural and cross-generational design solutions. Although focused on the ageing population in Guangdong province, China, Australian and Chinese participants were able to identify similarities between cultural groups and establish universal solutions that can be applied to a global audience. Significantly, we invited students from the health sciences, in the area of nursing, to participate in the workshops in 2016 and this led to many interesting new collaborations and modes of practice.

Creative Economy in China

The “Creative Economy” is a term used around the world to define the cultural and creative industries that can foster growth in post-industrial urban environments. The creative economy can be defined as an economy based on transactions in creative product. Creative products are grouped in the areas of culture, enterprise and technology. Large components of the creative economy are both the physical application of design and the integration of the design process in approaching the urban environment. Design integrates a range of considerations such as material, function, aesthetics, culture, engineering, human factors and lifestyle. Design helps to solve problems, realize potential and create new value and markets.

China initiated an open policy and reform in the 1980s. In March 2001, the creative and cultural industry was included in its 10th Five-Year plan. China published its blue paper on cultural industry for 2001-2002 (CASSRCCP 2001). In 2009, the state council published its Cultural Industry Revitalization Plan, which for the first time positioned the cultural industry as a backbone sector of a national economy (Gang 2016). Creative culture is a key strategy for China’s economic growth. For its remarkable achievements, UNESCO views China as one of the five most developed

economies for its cultural industry (the other being Japan, USA, UK and Germany) (UNESCO 2013).

Creative industries have proven to be successful in revitalizing areas of urban decline in major Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. M50 in Shanghai is an example of how postindustrial spaces can be transformed through creative economy. M50 is a cluster of warehouses situated on the bank of the Suzhou Creek. Up until 2003, the space was an industrial wasteland. Now, according to Daniels (Daniels et al: 2012), "M50 is one of Shanghai's most influential creative industry centers that is housed in a former textile factory occupied by more than 80 enterprises from 14 countries and regions and more than 10 provincial area in China." According to Kishore (2008): "Asians have absorbed and understood Western best practices in many areas, from free-market economics to the embrace of innovative science and technology, meritocracy, and the rule of law. And they have become innovative in their own way, creating new patterns of cooperation not seen in the West."

As per above, creative economy can be used a term to discuss creating new value from cultural areas and historic sites and by combining the power of creative and cultural industries to create new concepts for cultural production, designed objects for export and tourism. Creative economy however is not simply about "creative" practices such as the creation of objects for tourism and cultural appreciation but also the redesign of services through the application of design thinking practices. Design thinking as a process is being used in many governments and large multinationals as a driver for innovation. An understanding of how the application of cross-cultural design thinking processes benefits the creation of 'creative economy' would therefore give essential clues to how to establish more effective communication and design solutions to global issues such as ageing across borders.

Multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural workshops as a means to strengthen work-ready skills for students in creative arts & design

Our method is to bring together cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary groups of creative thinkers and apply a design thinking process to attempt to find solutions to complex global issues and to improve cross-cultural communication skills amongst participants. Design thinking, a solution focused approach that more directly responds to human experiences, behaviors and interactions, is a way to view 'wicked problems' that are complex and difficult to tackle. Through this process, needs are matched to new concepts around products and services.

Design thinking is a multi-step 'solution-focused' process using user experience, interview and interpretation to solve a known or otherwise unknown problem. A 'solution focused' approach allows for more innovative and human based results rather than results that rely purely on scientific or pre-assumed factors. This process can foster an understanding of human behaviours and interactions; it reverses the more traditional approaches used in business strategy that rely on small focus

groups and pre-assumed understanding of the market. Design thinking has become increasingly popular as a means to address specific business, government and world issues however it is often used in design or business disciplines at Universities. We argue that using design thinking processes as a method to stimulate ideas from students across a broader range of subject areas such as creative writing, cultural heritage and nursing, will create interesting and innovative new concepts.

In terms of working in multidisciplinary teams, it is often the case that disciplines work between similar areas (such as within the creative arts) but rarely stem into vastly different faculties (such as health and arts) within their undergraduate studies. Especially within health sciences, the concept of 'multidisciplinary' rarely goes beyond the allied health professions. It is also difficult within the health sciences to break out of specialisations. According to Benagiano and Brosens (2014):

During the second half of the twentieth century, advances in biomedical research and its applications in clinical management made it inevitable that medical and surgical disciplines once lumped together under the common name of 'internal medicine' and 'general surgery' be subdivided into dozens of specialties. Even disciplines once considered 'a specialty' were subdivided into sub-specialties.

Benagiano and Brosens (2014) go on to explain that a team approach in health care is especially effective in the area of aged or palliative care in which "the focus of medicine had to be shifted from the concept of 'curing' to that of maximising the quality of life and adjusting patients to life with long-term illnesses." We therefore aimed to bring together students from as wide a breadth of disciplines as possible in order to stimulate the creation of new and innovative ideas and concepts.

In our 2016 workshops we brought together students from nursing to participate alongside students from design and creative arts disciplines in creating new product ideas around "healthy ageing." This was especially effective for nursing students as they rarely work with students from the creative arts. According to Moen (2003), "Nurses' work can be delineated as independent, interdependent, and delegated activities." Nurses need to make many judgements based on their knowledge of nursing practices and also, they need to be collaborative; and to understand many different perspectives as they need to carry out "orders" from members of diverse health care teams. It is thus very important for practicing nurses to understand cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary communication skills.

Conversely it is essential for design and creative arts students to learn how to work with students from vastly different disciplines as the reality of the current work environment is such that they are as likely to work outside of their field of study at they are within it.

Creative arts and design students working with health sciences students can be a means to foster and support the needs of effective 'creative economies.' The need for 'embedded' creativity outside of the creative industries is as big as the need for specialists within the creative industries so it seems plausible to think that an equal proportion would go on to work in this 'embedded' mode (Lloyd, 2012)." In terms of

creative employment, students are as likely to work in different fields as they are in the field that they studied at University. According to Lloyd (2012), although many students go on to work within the creative fields they have studied – many also go on to work outside of the creative industries. They are still employed in “creative labour” however it is often “embedded” in other areas that have not traditionally been seen as “creative employment.” This statement gives weight to the benefit of re-thinking the traditional disciplinary structures; creating more fluid knowledge flows between them. In this current climate, students need to learn and understand that their career path may not be clear-cut. Students need to understand how to work beyond disciplinary boundaries. Teaching students to learn to deal with uncertainty and to take productive risks while working with their ideas in creative ways will be the best way forward (Crismond & Adams 2012).

Case Study: Cross-Cultural Design for Healthy Ageing

Pedagogically, study tours have been shown to provide transformative personal learning experiences (Mezirow, 2000). Study tours motivate students to learn more about the world, different cultures and different people. This promotes cultural awareness and respect for others, while developing teamwork-skills and enhancing student-teacher collegiality and engagement. When coupled with a topic that is relevant across cultures and disciplines, study tours can be an ideal way to foster cross-cultural and collaborative learning with students from very different disciplinary backgrounds.

The short term overseas study program is an approach to learning that employs experiential learning, cross-cultural, and multidisciplinary methods to foster a global understanding of design and entrepreneurialism as a means to foster innovation. The tours create a variety of opportunities and collaborations to engage students in transformative authentic learning in non-traditional learning environments. Following Lombardi (2007), the design projects as part of the tours focus on real- world, ill-defined complex problems and their solutions, intentionally ‘bringing into play multiple disciplines, multiple perspectives, ways of working, habits of mind, and community (Lombardi, 2007, 3).’

Our most recent tour of China (November 2016) was an example of how we fostered an understanding of cross-cultural design and collaboration in design. In November 2016, five Chinese universities (South China Agricultural University, East China Normal University, Guangxi Arts University and Shantou University) and two Australian universities (the University of Canberra and Monash University) came together at the South China Agricultural University in Guangzhou to work together finding cross-cultural solutions to the problems of ageing in China. Workshop participants were selected on their cultural backgrounds enabling Australian and cross-China (Guangdong and Guangxi provinces) perspectives. Participants were selected from a range of creative and health disciplines: architecture, fashion design, graphic design, industrial design, creative writing, communications, media arts, cultural heritage and nursing. This mix of disciplines allowed for a more vibrant

creative response as a larger knowledge pool enabled knowledge sharing across a variety of creative fields.

On the first day of the workshop, participants were given lectures by experts on the topic of “Design for Healthy Ageing.” Participants were then led through a guided design thinking exercise in which they mapped their personal experiences and understanding of ageing. During this exercise, Australian and Chinese responses were reviewed as a means to show overlapping cultural experiences and observations. Participants were then placed into cross-cultural groups with a mix of students from Australia, Shanghai and Guangxi province. Once in groups participants were tasked with brainstorming and creating ‘mind-maps’ as a way to visualize what they had learned from the lectures and the initial design thinking exercise.

Understanding and having empathy or “stepping in the shoes” of the user is an important step in the design thinking process. On the second day of the workshops, participants visited Song Ming Shang Yuan aged care centre in Pangu district, Guangzhou to speak with carers and engage with residents. In the centre, residents were located at different areas in the centre according to their health conditions. Workshop participants had the opportunity to interview both the staff and the residents. A stand out moment was when students spoke with Zhou Yi, a nurse with over a decade aged care experience at the centre. Alzheimer's disease, explained Zhou Yi, was one of her biggest challenges in working with the aged. The disease damages the brain, resulting in impaired memory, thinking and behaviour making patients confused and at times difficult to manage. The biggest risk factor for having Alzheimer's disease is increasing age (three in ten people over 85 in Australia having dementia) thus China is seeing many more cases of Alzheimer's with the growing population imbalance of over 65s. Along with the pressure and difficulties (long hours) in her work, Zhou Yi discussed that aged care nurses also face professional abuse. This hit a chord with one of the Australian participants, a nursing student who was doing a practicum as a nurse in Palliative Care. The student shared his experiences in the Australian health care system with Yi and the pair was able to learn from each other and see similarities across cultures. Thus, this experience at a Chinese aged care centre helped the students to learn about and observe the daily life of the elderly in the facility to more deeply understand the issues faced by both patients and carers.

On the third day participants brainstormed concepts and then created visualisation and simple prototypes of their concepts to test their viability. By interpreting what they saw and heard at the site visits and lectures, students were able to bridge cultural and linguistic barriers to create highly innovative solutions in their multicultural and multidisciplinary teams. Students created concepts that explored social isolation, user experience for older people, daily living aids, health and location monitoring for the elderly while enabling a sense of dignity and control for the wearer. For example, one of the teams created a removable device called ‘Sole Mate,’ that can be inserted in any shoe type. Providing a sense of reassurance, ‘Soul mate’ offers discrete and convenient personal health and location monitoring with the added benefit of therapeutic acupuncture delivery and vibration alert capability. The

device is worn as a shoe innersole with self-charging kinetic energy capacity and is housed in a slip-on sandal. The discreet nature of the device enables the wearer to maintain a sense of dignity and confidence. The ability to choose colours and styles according to personal taste gives the wearer a sense of autonomy and self-determination. Features include health monitoring linked to selected iPhone devices (including heart rate, pedometer), health benefits (e.g. acupuncture points to stimulate wellbeing & support of midfoot and arch) and location monitoring (e.g. GPS location device inserted & alerts sent to selected iPhone devices, etc.).

Another team designed an adjustable shelf and accessible bench unit called “Kitchen Command” that allows older people to control their kitchen, prepare basic foods, and maintain a high level of dignity and safety. They identified a common problem in China and Australia where a number of elderly people fall over and injure themselves while working in the kitchen. This can cause great pain and embarrassment, and may sometimes require expensive medical assistance. In their research and experience at the aged care facility, the team learnt that many elderly people in China require assistance to remain mobile. However, they may not want to admit that they need help or rely on others. The ‘Kitchen Command’ allows them to be mobile in a dignified way. It also allows them to maintain a level of everyday independence with their movement and cooking, which can improve mental health and contribute to their happiness. The Kitchen Command is accessible for wheelchair users. The bench unit is designed with enough space for wheelchair users to access the unit, reach the shelves, and prepare basic food. A normal chair could also be used in this space. The unit is connected to a small motor. A button in the bench unit activates and lowers the shelves down. The users can then get the items they need and press the button to raise the shelf, before preparing food on the stone bench top. As a result, there is a lower risk of falling while trying to reach anything.

Overall the design solutions displayed in a final exhibition at the South China Agricultural University showed a surprising depth of understanding of the issues, cultural concerns and human needs associated with ageing in China. The participants were drawn not only from cultures that are significantly different (Australia and China) but also from different areas within China itself, since we selected not only participants from Guangzhou but also regional participants from areas of Guangxi province in Southwest China. The solutions reflected not only the perspective of a cultural outsider (the Australian students) but also the perspective of both rural and urban Chinese students making them unique in their cultural understanding and approach. Another element that made this process unique in comparison to a conventional workshop was that the participants were drawn from multiple creative disciplines such as creative writing, architecture, cultural heritage, graphic design, industrial design, media arts and communications and from health sciences (nursing). Whilst some of these discipline areas quite commonly cross and share similar methodologies and approaches, such as the design disciplines, areas such as nursing, creative writing, communications and cultural heritage have different methods to approach research and creative thinking and rarely work with the design disciplines. Despite, or possibly because of, a tight deadline coupled with cultural and linguistic challenges - the more obvious one between Australian and

Chinese participants but also subtler regional linguistic and cultural differences between the different regions in China - the workshop was an experiment that proved to be a highly effective means of generating new creative responses.

Conclusion

Bringing together multicultural and cross-cultural groups of students from vastly different disciplines such as the creative art and health sciences can bring about interesting new perspectives and solutions to issues that are global in scale. The collaboration of the voices here demonstrates that perspectives and approaches do differ considerably across regimes of thought. When working in isolated disciplinary teams, students are likely to work in processes that are learned. Feedback from the participants asserts the strong learning outcomes gained. *“I very much enjoyed stepping out of the health sector paradigm to look at aged care with the design students. They were a great bunch of students to get to know and work with. I found the experience worthwhile and would do it again.”* – Monash Nursing Student, Tour Feedback report, 2016. When having to break disciplinary and cultural boundaries, more intuitive and organic responses can occur thus leading to more interesting outcomes. Inherently, designed objects, services, spaces and experiences express cultural values. Design, notes Jarvinen and Koskinen (2001), ‘introduces content to our lives and thus enhances the quality of our interactions with the material world - and increasingly to services that accompany them.’

Culture itself is a major element of innovation, and people work within ‘cultures’ – i.e. the country, race, religious or national group that they are born into as well as the ‘culture’ or a discipline or practice area. When we challenge students to mix, blur and bend these borders the outcomes can be profound. For not only do students need to work in new ways of practice, they also need to adapt to a new cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary practice that transcends traditional modes of study.

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