THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA: DESIGN AND PRACTICE OF “MACAU IMPRESSION” ART AND DESIGN CHARACTERISTIC COURSES

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary design concerns more about “the future of nostalgia” to highlight the humanistic and social value of design beyond time and space. “Reflective nostalgia” is different from “restorative nostalgia” since the former is not keen on visual representation that restores the past, but focuses on a forward-looking engagement with stories of the past. The institution where the author serves as a lecturer has brought integrated social consciousness and humanism into art and design education, thus devising a creative course module entitled “Macau Impression”. It strives to combine the current international practice in art design education with local characteristics. Through instructing students to produce visual texts of different kinds, the course aims to enhance students’ cognitive recognition of the intensity of local culture, and to develop the capacity to construct and communicate “reflective nostalgia” in their design works.

Keywords: reflective nostalgia, art and design characteristic course, Macau Impression

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the year 1993 when art and design was adopted in higher education in Macau, almost all students majoring in art and design are natives born in Macao. However, in 2008 when Macau University of Science and Technology began to provide art and design courses, a proportion of students, about 80%, were from Mainland China. Through the encounter, the local students are encouraged to enhance their cognitive recognition of local culture tension, while students from Mainland China, whose local cultural affinity is marginal yet who have strong cultural affiliation with the hegemonic contemporary mainland popular culture, are helping in creating a unique intermediary space where both student bodies can be enlightened to think about their own cultural traditions.
After some observation of this unique intercultural mingling, the author devised a creative course module entitled “Macau Impression”. It is trying to bring local characteristics into the current international practice in art and design education. Students are instructed to produce visual texts of different kinds, by which the courses are achieving the aim of helping students to enhance cognitive recognition of local culture tension and develop the capacity to construct and communicate “reflective nostalgia” in their design works. This paper first gives an introduction to the background of art and design education in Macau, and then analyzes selected students works in this module, followed by discussions and implications for the future.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts autoethnography as a qualitative research method to explore visual representation of cultural memories produced in an art and design course. According to (Maréchal 2009) “autoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing”. In the current study, the author views teaching the art and design course as an ethnographic field work, participating and observing the students’ autobiographical storytelling. The students are both the research subjects and the research collaborator, as they engage in a dialogic, co-creative process of cultural reflection. By analyzing the visual texts created, the evocative narratives are seen as expressions of self-consciousness that evolves and transforms through continuous dialogues. Autoethnography is the appropriate method to connect the students’ autobiographical and personal visual narratives to the larger social and cultural contexts they live and work in. By way of analyzing students’ visual texts and respecting narrators’ personal narratives as self-consciousness and a transition process of consciousness expressed in evocative narratives, the paper is aimed at relating autoethnography to sociology and pedagogy, exploring the value of contemporary art and design education as a kind of cultural practice.

3. THE GENERAL EDUCATION CONDITION OF ART AND DESIGN IN MACAU

As a part of China, Macau Special Administrative Region is situated in the coast area, facing the South China Sea in the east and south. According to the data in 2012, Macau’s total area is 29.9 square kilometers and its resident population is 591,900. Compared with Hong Kong which is 1104 square kilometers in area and with a population about 7,150,000, Macau is quite a mini city.

The general education condition of art and design in Macau is as follows: the University of East Asia, established in 1981 and later renamed as the University of Macau, is the first university in Macau. In 1993, the School of Art of Macao Polytechnic Institute was founded.
and first set up the major of art and design. In 2008, Macau University of Science and Technology started to offer students art and design courses. Currently, there are four tertiary institutions having set the major of art and design. They are respectively Macau University of Science and Technology, Macao Polytechnic Institute, University of Saint Joseph and City University of Macau.

Besides, tertiary institutions with art and design are a small number and with only a short history in Macau; the cultural and creative industries started late in Macau; the local market highly depends on the cooperation with foreign design companies. The demand for products of creativity and local art & design is relatively low. In a word, the developed economy has not provided a mature platform with powerful support for the development of cultural and creative industries in Macau. Nevertheless, the area’s development in the long run, the city’s characteristics, the composition of industries, the orientation of Macau as an international MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferencing/ Conventions, and Exhibitions/Expositions) tourism city, and recent years’ cultural and creative industries’ strategy implementation, all require the development of art and design in local tertiary institutions and the cultivation of talents for cultural and creative industries.

Macau is a unique and beautiful city which has been experiencing Chinese history and culture for more than 5000 years and Western and Eastern cultural exchange for 500 years. As one of the first city of China open to the outside world, Macau only possesses micro economy structure, but it is renowned as a “city like a museum”, which can be demonstrated not only by the preservation of historical heritage integrity, but also the daily life of the local residents.

Macau economy, to a great extent, depends on gambling tourism. Currently, its overall economy is developing fairly fast, whereas its cultural and creative industries are still hovering on the initial stage. From an objective perspective, the micro economic structure has restricted the development of cultural and creative industries. What is more, because modern art and design education in Macau is weak in cultivating local sense of identity, the art and design education with independent cultural thinking is lagging behind on the whole, which is directly impacting the development of cultural and creative industries. In addition, Macau is noted as a special administrative region along with Hong Kong, but she just plays a nominal role in many fields. For quite a long time, a great many monographic researches on art and design education in Macau are criticized for no adaptation and reproduction, which is leading to the study and practice in this field staying on the surface.

Since 1993 when art and design was adopted in the higher education in Macau, almost all students majoring in art and design are natives. However, since in 2008 when The faculty of Humanities and Arts of Macau University of Science and Technology began to offer art and design courses, a total of 342 students enrolled, with 67 (about 20%) from local Macau and 275 (about 80%) from the Mainland. To actively participate in the process of globalization, the local students should enhance their cognitive recognition of local culture tension, while as to students from Mainland China with profound traditional culture, their study in Macau could
be both marginal and central, on an intermediary stage where students are easier to be enlightened to think about culture.

4. ART AND DESIGN CREATIVE DISCIPLINES

As one of the vital creative disciplines in higher education, art and design has effectively put into reality the belief and value from art and design education in contemporary universities, just as the renowned American philosopher and educator John Dewey put forward, "the case for art and design creative disciplines contribute uniquely to education”, and "they select and focus the elements of enjoyable worth which make any experience directly enjoyable. They are not luxuries of education, but emphatic expressions of that which makes any education worthwhile” (Dewey 1966)

The essence of contemporary university education is lying in the general education focusing on the cultivation of students’ comprehensive abilities. The university education attaches great importance to students' training of free thinking and independent judgment, to the enlightenment of students’ creative thinking, and to the cultivation of students’ sense of collective responsibility and awareness of caring about and serving the society. By analogy, by setting the art and design discipline, the comprehensive universities aim at cultivating students’ creative thinking ability of art and design. As one of the vital creative disciplines in higher education, art and design cultivates students to build a habit of caring about the society and culture, enhances students’ sense of collective responsibility and enables them to get rid of individual self-closed mindedness. Consequently, students will get to know the real function of art in contemporary society and life, and find out problems in reality.

The pedagogical purposes of art and design creative disciplines involve three aspects:

1) Cultivating students to build a habit of daily freehand sketching and care about the society constantly;

2) Training student with basic drawing and charting skills and enabling them to explicitly express themes by way of sketches;

3) Guiding students to adopt multi-dimensional cultural perspectives and acquire the sense and ability of introspection and criticism, and cultivating creative thinking ability as well.

5. THE DESIGN OF “MACAU IMPRESSION” CHARACTERISTIC COURSES AND REALIZATION OF “DIALOGICALITY”

Characteristic courses are essential basic curriculum in university design education. The so-called “characteristic” does not refer to the personalization of instructional mode, but to
the creative course designed by considering local conditions during pedagogical practice, a way to innovate characteristics of both internalization and localization in education.

“Macau Impression” characteristic courses provide different forms of image texts. The texts, consisting of written materials for teaching, speech, activities and experience, are phenomena and archives that can elicit meaningfulness of curriculum. The image text in teaching mainly includes journal, topic invention and design, calendar design, etc.

“journal” as the most important extracurricular work in all the stages of basic teaching, requires students to create an image text of journal that records daily life and observations in society. The image text of journal relatively objectively records the process of formation and transition of students' individual memory. This autobiographical visual narratives allow nontraditional forms and expressions to surface, where the “personal” is able to be situated in, juxtaposed to, and/or integrated with the "cultural”. They become the evocative narratives (Ellis 2004) that the autoethnographic gaze focuses on. In the early phase of “journal”, there will be few differences existing in views of Macau between local students and those from mainland China who just come to Macau, usually observing the city from a perspective of travelers, for the images in their journal are analogous to those in the tourist brochures (see Fig.1- Fig.2). Although having been living in Macau and experiencing city life since their birth, native students are sharing similar methods of observation with tourists, as seen from Fig. 3 and Fig. 4.

Figure 1: Created by the freshman named Zheng qi (Macau), photographed by the author, 2001
Figure 2: Created by the freshman named Jiang yachao (Macau), photographed by the author, 2001

Figure 3: Created by the freshman named CHOI, CHI SI (Macau), photographed by the author, 2001

Figure 4: Created by the freshman named CHANG, KA WAI (Macau), photographed by the author, 2001
On the second stage of teaching, students are beginning to get rid of unconsciousness in one’s self-world and the original cognition of “Macau in the eye of the other”, and searching for the establishment of identity actively(Fig.5-Fig.7). In this phase, some students are keeping aloof from others’ cognition and searching for subjectivity, i.e. individual identification, which indicates the state of seeking common ground and reserving differences to different extent. There are also some students, during one-year journal image text learning, gaining no change or still observing from their own views.

Figure 5: Created by the freshman named Wang Xiaotong, photographed by the author, 2013

Figure 6: Created by the freshman named CHEANG, UN HENG (Macau), photographed by the author, 2010
Local students will experience abrupt transition of individual identity after they go to university, because previously natives share the same learning environment, while later in the university, they are becoming the minority group for most of students are from Mainland China. (In the author’s class, more than two thirds of the students come from Mainland China.)

During the practice of "Macau Impression" characteristic courses, Macau students start to care about their own identity. Meanwhile, students from the Mainland are inspired to observe local society and residents in views different from those of travelers. After stepping into this phase, the value of "Dialogic" (Mikhail 1966) comes into being. Mikhail Bakhyin, the renowned Soviet thinker, literature and art theorist, semiologist, and also a representative of Soviet structuralist semiology, proposed dialogic theory that later became the rationale of "Dialogic learning" and "Dialogic Teaching" in pedagogy. Dialogic is a special form of interaction among the autonomous and equally signifying consciousness. Dialogic spirit which embraces equality, cooperation, interaction and creation, is an important value element throughout the whole process of dialogic teaching and plays a role of orientation in dialogic teaching.

Fig. 8 and Fig.9 both are "Macau Impression" sketches by local students. The painternarrates her learning experience from the kindergarten to the high school named Colegio de Santa Rosa de Lima from the view of caring about self-growth, taking memory as symbolic representation of self-expression. (Fig.8)
Figure 8: Created by the freshman named FONG, KA I (Macau), photographed by the author, 2013

Figure 9: Created by the freshman named CHEANG, TAT PONG (Macau), photographed by the author, 2013
Figure 10: Created by the freshman named Zheng Dan, photographed by the author, 2010

Figure 11: Created by the freshman named Zhong Yi, photographed by the author, 2010

Figure 12: Created by the freshman named Zhao Sisi, photographed by the author, 2013

“Macau Impression” calendar design is the extracurricular work in the third phase of the characteristic courses. It requires students to transmit information in their memory via
images clued by time. By analyzing the image text, the author discovers that folklore and tradition such as the Spring Festival, Qing Ming Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-autumn Festival are themes attractive to students, which highlights homogeneity of traditional Chinese culture (see Fig. 13 and Fig. 14), while heterogeneity of individual memory is highlighted by transmitting such information as various religious belief and regional folk faith like the Ghost Festival, the Immaculate Conception, and workers’ demonstration on Labor Day. Some works of art show students’ special views in their self-world. In post-modern society, the features of “culture as a text” are revealed in dialogicality in teaching text.

Figure 13: Created by the freshman named KUOK, TONG I (Macao), photographed by the author, 2013
6. The “MACAU IMPRESSION” CHARACTERISTIC COURSES AND THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF “REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA”

Nostalgia is a phenomenon in culture and common in human beings’ social psychology as well. Contemporary design and practice concern more about “the future of nostalgia” for the purpose of highlighting the humanistic and social value of design beyond time and space. The study of modern design education philosophy in the worldwide context in the view of “Reflective nostalgia” (Svetlana, 2002) completely shows the application of modern art and design in cultural construction and reflectiveness of culture. If cultural and creative industries are supposed to be the significant components of cultural construction to improve art and design, then “Reflective nostalgia” emphasizes reflectiveness and criticism of art and design in cultural memory construction and cultural text.

People’s horizon depends on the depth of their cultural cognition. If the watcher’s cultural cognition is going deep, then his visible area will be enlarged. Because of Macau’s special geographical location and culture, this mini city is bequeathed historic heritages by previous exchange between Eastern and Western culture. Meanwhile, it has become a highly developed modern city which is boosted by gambling tourism. Art and design is one of cultural phenomena. Besides the government promotion policy for industrialization of creative designs, art and design vitality comes from “an unconscious space” and sympathy of cultural memory. This de-familiarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their stories, to narrate the relationship among past, present and future.

Festival events displayed by Fig. 13- Fig. 15 exhibit many Chinese rites, which are indications of cultural memory recorded by rites. Rites themselves are memorial, and rites’ processes are further intensified and remembered by paintings, both of which are parts of individual cultural memory. The intensification of memory’s vitality enables individual memory to
repeat, to be activated and triggered again. Recalling is not only a complex action, but also a plastic and changeable process. People impacted by others will recollect a lot with association. This is applicable to both individuals and the whole nationality. (Assmann 2002)

Cultural memory in Macao includes historic heritages from Eastern and Western cultural exchange, people’s personal memory of setbacks and love in life when they came to Macau by chance, and the interpretation of mind and value criticism. Cultural criticism is introduced to design mindset training, and aesthetic value is fused into art and design experience. Conscious training in art and design basic curriculum aims to enhance students’ ability of recalling history with emotion, to cultivate artists and designers with cultural insight, thus highlighting the humanistic and social value of design beyond time and space. “Reflective nostalgia” is modern nostalgia, which is different from the generally known “restorative nostalgia”. "Reflective nostalgia” is not keen on visual representation that restores the past, but focuses on a forward-looking engagement with stories of the past. (Boym 2002)

Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory. The two might overlap in their frames of reference, but they do not coincide in their narratives and plots of identity. "Reflective nostalgia” visual representation in art and design courses lies in regarding culture as a text and the process as memory innovation, and then converting cultural phenomena into valid cultural memory, accentuating memory’s manifestation and features existing in the process of recollection.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the foundation of Staatliches Bauhaus in the beginning of the 20th century, higher education of independent art and design and cultivation of talents have directly influenced the national and regional cultural and creative competition, economical and cultural development and other fields. Given the current economical, cultural and ecological conditions in Macau, the training and support for professionals in creative sectors become especially urgent. The first step of the education reform includes the reexamination of original programs and unit plans.

Because of the international and local characteristics of Macau, the art and design education should emphasize the intermediateness and fluidity of both the Eastern and Western cultures. Cultural phenomena caused by diverse cultural value shock coexist in Macau, which assists to construct multiple cultural memories. Contemporary design, which regards nostalgia as a common phenomenon in culture and human beings’ social psychology, concerns more about “the future of nostalgia” for the purpose of highlighting the humanistic and social value of design beyond time and space, accentuating the visual representation of humanistic nostalgia, and focusing on a forward-looking engagement with stories of the past.
The course of “Macau Impression” attempts to seek an instructional mode through which internationalization and localization could both be applied to the art and design education. Social consciousness and humanism are stressed as core values in the course design. Activities, such as “Macau and Me”, encourage students to connect with historic events in their daily life and record their experience using the language of visual art. Evocative narratives are applied to the teaching text design while reflexive ethnography is carried out during teaching. During the process, by examining the “journaling” together, the students are transformed from passive learners to active participants; the producer becomes “I”, the reader becomes “You”, and the theme becomes “We”. Auto ethnography, to a certain extent, functions as a tool for critical self-examination on the part of the researcher, a reflexive means. The course aims to make students feel for the local culture, strengthen their sense of self identity, develop their creative thinking skills, and encourage them to appreciate the harmonious relationship of design, society and individuals and the art of design in general. Meanwhile, resources collected, created and cumulated during the course form an archive of cultural heritage of Macau.

The follow-up study will further analyze image texts in teaching, and examine the education and training in the field of art and design under the humanistic perspective. The results are expected to be beneficial to the establishment of ecology of fine art, and the training of creative professionals in Macau. The study will strive to explore new development mode featured with Macau characteristics in higher education of art and design. I hope the present study would be valuable reference to further research on art and design education and development of cultural and creative industries in Hong Kong, Macau and other areas of Asia.

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