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## ARCHITECTURAL FIELD STUDY IN AN UNFAMILIAR CULTURE – CASE STUDY IN CHINA TRIPS

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Architectural field studies in unfamiliar cultures can address issues of globalisation in architectural education. The aim of the trip is to provide environments where students consciously design with cultural and environmental sensitivity in a variety of cultural and geographical locations. This requires design skills in an unfamiliar culture and communicative strategies to work with local communities, staff and students in local universities. To work in a different environment is a process of 'defamiliarisation'. As suggested by Bauman, the term 'defamiliarisation' refers to a process which "takes us away from our comfortable, limited, commonly accepted and often unconsidered opinions about what everybody and everything is like and makes us more sensitive to the way that those opinions are formed and maintained. It alerts us to the ways that things which at first sight appear obvious and 'natural' are actually the result of social action, social power or social tradition" (1990:15-6).

*Staff and students in local universities can make valuable contributions to find problems and solutions in an unfamiliar environment*

A successful overseas study trip can be prepared and organised in terms of four distinct dimensions of cross-culture study. First, lectures, reading lists and choosing of various visiting places to reveal the complexity and richness of a different culture. Second, to foster cross-culture awareness and inter-cultural communicative strategies in a four step task. This task is for students to record expectations, experience and reflections of their learning processes before, during and after the trip. It can be done by using drawings, journals, reports and films etc. Third, to provide a professional environment by contacting the local universities so joint design projects can be organised with the local staff and students. Staff and students in local universities can make valuable contributions to find problems and solutions in an unfamiliar environment. Last but not least, to set up briefs of the proper projects that suit local situations. The process of design is the process of learning of the local culture and communication with local expertise and users. As in the real projects, brief building and design proposals are parallel activities. A properly developed brief should be an interaction between the description of the desired outcome and expectations. In the learning outcome, students need to demonstrate cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence.

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**International skills and those appropriate for the local requirements**

It is a mis-assumption that students have an inbuilt potential to respond appropriately to an unfamiliar culture. To design in a different place requires skills that can be applied globally and skills in caring for the local needs. Tasks need to be set up for students to learn these skills. The ensuing inquiry of the solutions for problems is a global experiment, as Bernsen has noted that “the fact that the designs of nature and the designs of man can be analysed according to a common set of criteria, stems from the fact that they have a basic property in common: they are solutions to a problem” (Bernsen 1986:10, cited from Friedman 1997:5). A design in an unfamiliar culture requires the global experiment to be a reflective conversation with the local situations. If design and invent is a global skill, then a designer also needs to relate what he/she designs to the aspirations of the locals who use the buildings, and be able to predict the impact on the local users.

The most important part of architectural education in terms of curriculum focus and time spent by students is architectural design. It is normally in the design studio that students are expected to bring together knowledge from the different disciplines to inform the development of their architectural designs. But some skills are very difficult to learn merely in studio studies, such as cultural, sensitive and communication with people from different cultures. Field study and projects in different countries provide good opportunities for students to link the global design skills and local design skills and to link the knowledge they learnt in other modules such as those in history and theory in the design process.

One problem for students who study a practically orientated subject is that they are not willing to fully engage in the study of design history and theory. Some architectural students pay more attention to practically orientated skills, and prioritise their time between theory and practical work. This attitude can relate to surface approach and deeper approach of learning. For students who believe that design is about look and feel, they tend to focus on the styles and aesthetic effects of buildings. Students who take a deep approach to learning have a focus on understanding and making sense of the context a building sits in. They look beyond the literal aspects of material through interpretation and analysis. Whilst students who take a surface approach disregard underlying structures of the context, students who take a deep approach would seek out relational aspects both within the context and to the design conceptual frameworks.

The fact that the need to design in an unfamiliar culture encourages students to look for relationships that are embedded in the theory to make the design meaningful in an unfamiliar place. The assignments in a different place require the students to synthesise information and to have an understanding

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of the reasons for these events, in order to form proposals for the support of local culture. When students become confused about subjects they are supposed to know in an unfamiliar culture; and as they have tried to work their way out of their confusion, they have begun to look into the inner relationships between different aspects of the context. When students are able to appreciate fully the relevance and purpose of the theory and practice interface, they should then be in a stronger position to improve their international design skills and skills in caring for the local needs.

It needs a systematic approach to facilitate the learning for both international skills and skills in caring for the local requirements. From our experience of international trips to China, I will discuss our training programme for the overseas trips as follows:

Lectures, discussions and guided reading lists before the trip will help students to gain substantial knowledge of the place. A wide range of materials need to be chosen to avoid the essentialist views of the place in the lectures and reading documents.

Arrange a number of visits to cover different urban and rural areas in order to present the richness and variety of sub-cultures in each country.

Four step tasks for students to learn the communication strategies with each other and with local students of the visiting places.

### ◆ **Two trips to Kunming University**

Kunming is the capital city of the Yunnan province in Southwest China. The province is the sixth largest of China's provinces. It shares borders with Burma, Laos and Vietnam and has been known as the gateway from China to Southeast Asia. It is very well known for a very high level of ethnic diversity with 26 ethnic groups out of a total of 56 in China. The area was also one of China's less developed regions. Many rural families, especially in the peripheral areas, have considerably lower incomes compared to those in the developed regions. Kunming is the provincial capital of Yunnan. It is a city with a long history of more than 1200 years. The city is an important regional central city with a 4.7 million population. It is also called 'Spring City' due to the pleasant weather all year round. The city has changed dramatically since the 1980s following rapid urban development.

Staff and students in Department of Architecture of Kunming University of Science and Technology have worked with our architectural staff and students on more than 30 joint projects during field studies in 2008 and 2009. They have made valuable contributions helping our students to gain a greater awareness and understanding of cultural and contextual differences within the limited visiting time. Together with many lectures given by the Chinese staff and professionals and three days visiting the various sites and

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museums in the city, joint projects provided Huddersfield students with the best opportunities to explore the Chinese architecture and culture. In the trip to China, our students also visited Lijiang, Daili, Xishuangbanna and Beijing. Each place presented them with different aspects of Chinese culture.

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**Lectures, discussions and guided reading lists to provide  
the background knowledge**

Lectures, discussions and guided reading lists before the trip will help students to gain substantial knowledge of the place. The emphasis here should be to avoid the essentialist views of the place in the lectures and reading documents. A society would be complex enough to include various sub-cultures that are embedded in the built environment (Holliday *et. al.*, 2004).

In both trips to Kunming, students were overwhelmed by the large scale construction works carried out in the city and the international styles adopted on contemporary Chinese architecture. It was easy to draw conclusion that the city has been overtaken by modern or post-modern styles. But this is an over simplified way of introducing and studying places. The meaning of urban fabric are sufficiently complex to include the cultural attributes which people may consider Western or International style, but which are in fact normal for buildings and cities in Chinese society.

Lectures therefore were arranged both before and during the trip explaining that there are two tendencies in the modern Chinese urban development. On the one hand, international styles or some exotic modern styles in architecture are adopted to represent the modern lifestyle. Those are not designed for a context that consisted of the existing city urban fabric, but nevertheless are the results of the lifestyle that is different from traditional ones. On the other hand, strong sentiments are still tied to the Chinese traditions which lead to the design towards balance and harmony.

It would, therefore, be simpler to classify one building or the other as a traditional or a modern style. In Kunming, after the initial anxieties about the conflict of the tradition and modernity in the 1980s, the current tendency appears to avoid giving clear definition of tradition versus modernity. There is now increasing interest in the effects of hybrid juxtapositions in order to overcome the conflict between the two (Gao 2008). To design in this context needs to understand the reasons beneath the appearance in order to design for a livable urban area rather than focusing on the look and feel of the styles.

A contrast to what has happened in cities can also be clearly seen in rural areas such as Lijiang, Dali and Xishuangbanna where students visited during the same trip. In the rural area in Yunnan, tourism is encouraged by the local governments to promote the economy, that is one of the important reasons that many traditional houses are preserved and new buildings are

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designed following the traditional styles (ibid). However, the scarcity of timber would mean that it was more expensive for the farmers to build a traditional timber house than build a modern brick or concrete house. In less developed regions, cost of a building had a much bigger impact on the decisions of the house owners. Students need to understand the cultural and social meanings of the built environment in order to support and complement the local identities. Following each lecture, discussion was organised in groups focusing on how to keep the traditional ambience of the traditional areas, whether to preserve the existing structures or literally recreate something from the past.

Reading and theory have generally not been prized as much as design projects by architectural students, but critical thinking on design needs to be built on substantial knowledge of the local situations. It becomes even more important when design cannot rely on look and feel in an unfamiliar place, because what signs and symbols represented locally may well be very different from students' past experiences. To understand the local situations and to design for providing better built environment need careful study and critical analysis. Compare this to the projects in the familiar places, the work involved in overseas trips require more research, writing and professional dialogue on the culture aspects. This would be a good opportunity for the student to think about the theory and link the theory with the design practice in order to articulate the ways in which meaning is produced locally.

*critical thinking on  
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on substantial  
knowledge of the local  
situations*

For these reasons, reading before the trip is still the most efficient way of building the relevant contents of a different culture. There is a necessity for a tutor to make the explicit reading list for all the students. The aim of such a list is to introduce the culture and history of culture in the visiting country from different perspectives. These documents should be a systematic review of the literature that includes a variety of different approaches, covering built environment in the urban and rural areas, various sub-cultures, technologies and materials etc. Each student can choose a particular subject from the list that he/she is most interested in to study in detail.

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**Trips to cover different urban and rural places  
to reflect various sub-cultures**

Holliday et al have argued that subcultures are not hierarchically subordinate, or deviant, to the respective "parent" cultures. They note that "a more open-ended picture seems more appropriate, in which the "small cultures" of the tourists, the village, the tourist-tourism business and so on have a multiplicity of relationship both within and transcending larger entities." (Holliday et al 2004:28). Different places will reflect various subcultures in the country. We had chosen both urban and rural areas for students to investigate the social and cultural environments.

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Apart from Kunming, the middle size city in China was chosen as the design site, rural areas such as Dali, Lijiang, and Xishuangbanna were also visited by students. These are places that not only rely on farming but also increasingly develop tourism to promote the local economy. A comparison was drawn to the visit to Beijing, the capital city with various famous architecture such as the Forbidden City, Olympic Stadium “Bird Nest”, and National Opera etc, which added another dimension to students understanding of the place. The comparison among these traditional settlements illustrates to the students the uneven developments of the various tradition within changing historical, economic and socio-political contexts.

*In the joint projects, it was personal communications between British and Chinese students that helped to make the design decisions*

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**Four step tasks for students to learn the communication strategies and to look at a place through others eyes.**

The overseas field trip can develop students’ communication strategies and principles in a globalising world. To study on the trip and to undertake joint projects with local staff and students will add an important learning element to the study trip. This is different from visiting tourists that focus on looking and consuming in another culture. In the joint projects, it was personal communications between British and Chinese students that helped to make the design decisions. The process can foster students’ ability in their future career to communicate with the clients and users of the building regarding their needs, and work with experts in other disciplines to make sure the building designed is buildable technically and financially. These communication skills which students learn will be useful when more and more architects are working on overseas projects.

To communicate with local communities or students in a different culture, the focus will be, as Holliday et al have argued that, “to avoid the trap of over-generalisation and reduction when describing and interacting with others. Within the theme of representation the emphasis will be on deconstructing the imposed images of people from the media and popular discourse.” (Holliday et al 2004:3). To communicate with anyone who belongs to a group with whom we are unfamiliar, we also have to understand the complex of how he/she is (ibid). Both British and Chinese students find everyone is very different in each group. They experienced how complex each person was, rather than the stereotype of how a Chinese or a Brit might be. People may also appear quite culturally different in each setting (ibid:13). As Gee has referred to ‘situated identities’, which means that we have ‘different identities or social positions we enact and recognise in different settings’ (Gee 1999:12-3).

According to Holliday et al, “to communicate with group members from different countries effectively they do not need information about the

other’s presumed national culture. Actually it may lead to the views of prescriptive and indeed essentialist.” (2004:9) In the China trip, four step tasks were set up for students to learn to communicate with each other and look at a place through other peoples’ eyes<sup>1</sup>. These four steps are discussed in detail as follows:

### Stage 1: Translation

In this stage of the project each student teams up with an unfamiliar peer in the cohort to look at a place through others eyes. Each student in the team gives his/her peer a brief describing the setting of his/her own living room in the student house and his/her experience living in the city. The team member will then recreate the setting of the living room in order to catch this student’s memory of the city. They can use notes, sketches, photos, models or films to show one person’s memory of a place. Students can develop the recording of others’ memory and sound out their own voices about the events in their own design. In the process, they aim to peel away the layers of the place and understand more about their group members and their views of the city. In this way they will also enrich their own understanding of the place (Fig.1).

Fig.1 BA third year student Zillul Halim’s collage for Stage 1 in China trip 2009



<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Hillary Graham for helping me formalise the four step tasks for overseas trips.



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**Stage 2: Imagination**

In the first stage of the project students have experience to record people's memories, feelings and ideas about a place in their recreated images, films and models. In the second stage, students will use the same technique to record and analyse their own personal expectations for the China trip. They can describe the different culture they will meet, the challenges and exciting aspects they expect, and how they will be informed by, for example Chinese students they will work with, and about the city Kunming they will visit. Students are encouraged to use drawings and images rather than the purely literal to record the imagination. By imagining what the place will look like, students are encouraged to sound out their own voices to express their hopes and aspirations, fears and threats in the images and films.

Despite the advanced modern technologies that allow students to look at the cities in China online before they arrive there, they created many creative images of their expectations for what Chinese cities and Chinese culture would be (Fig.2).



Fig.2 Zillul Halim's drawings  
for Stage 2 in China trip  
2009

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**Stage 3. Joint projects**

Joint projects are carried out for both Chinese and British students to re-examine their expectations of places on site. These joint projects are discussed in detail in my paper *Joint Architectural Projects with Students in Visiting Countries During Field Studies* of this book. To overcome the language problem, we have at least one Chinese student who can speak good English within each group. In the process of setting up the right briefs for the joint projects, we have studied the different focuses in the architectural pedagogy in Kunming and those in Huddersfield.

In the joint projects, one should also note that there are potential different focuses on the architectural pedagogy in various countries. Professor Zhaihui, the Head of Department of Architecture and Associate Professor Li Liping have detailed discussion of their teaching practices in Kunming in papers "*Seeking Harmony not Sameness*" *Through International Co-Operation* and *The Regional and International Architectural Education and Practice in Kunming, China*

of this book. The architectural education in Kunming focuses on teaching students to look into the problems, to try to keep the local identity in the design. Their research has investigated detailed physical, social and economic surveys of the existing settlements and communities. Our students commented that their design schemes in the joint projects had paid more attention to these cultural and social context of the local users (Fig.3).

*Fig.3 Sketches of analysing the space usage on Kunming streets by Smita Patel 2008*



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**Stage 4. Reflection.**

When students come back from the trip, it is important for them to reflect upon what they experienced and learnt in China. To focus on the reflection of learning, students are asked to form a written and illustrated report that details their academic study in Kunming. Their report needs to focus upon key aspects of what they learnt while studying in a different culture and how this may influence their portfolio development. The report needs to address or be constructed around the following questions:

- 1) A brief summary of Chinese culture and whether this has influenced the portfolio development.
- 2) Using images and words to describe the different culture they experienced there, what were the challenges and exciting aspects they met.

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3) Compare and contrast the learning experience while studying in China to their learning experience at home in the United Kingdom. What are the key differences and are there any similarities? Have they been able to develop their portfolio while in China that would not have been available to students while studying in the United Kingdom?

Our students commented that Chinese students had more detailed analysis related to cultural and social elements of the local communities and their design aimed to solve the practical problems. By knowing much more about different ways of solving the problems, students generally felt that the experience had made them think more about the cultural relationships, religion, family structure, and social aspects of the users in their design. This is just what study trips within different cultures aim to achieve.

*In the process of setting up the right briefs for the joint projects, we have studied the different focuses in the architectural pedagogy in Kunming and those in Huddersfield*

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