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Design in Different Cultures as a Participant Rather Than an Observer - case study of the joint architectural projects between students from the UK and Chinese students

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International work is increasingly important to RIBA chartered practices. According to RIBA's survey, 16% of the total income for the architectural offices comes from projects outside the UK. To enhance students' knowledge and skills to design for different cultures, architectural schools have increasingly included overseas field studies and design projects in the curriculum. However, much research of the international trips and design projects focus on offering design solutions by studying the different climate and life styles in visited places as objective facts. There is relatively little research on the different ways of approaching the design and perceiving the meanings of the designed buildings in subjective narratives in different cultures. To design a building in a particular place as a participant rather than an observer can bring more insightful personal understanding of the local culture. By study a project concerning extended collaborative field studies undertaken in Southwest China by a group of architectural students from the UK and local Chinese students, this study explores their way of approaching the design with the meanings and feelings of the place rather than the abstract concepts. It argues that the overseas field study needs to take into account of the different ways of approaching design and perceiving the buildings in the visited regions. The design solutions also need to leave space for the local users to make sense of the designed space in the process of the usage.