

Chapter 64

Critical Thinking and Design Education in China: Considerations from a Western Perspective

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ABSTRACT

“If a science of societies exists, one must certainly not expect it to consist of a mere paraphrase of traditional prejudices. It should rather cause us to see things in a different way from the ordinary man, for the purpose of any science is to make discoveries, and all such discoveries more or less upset accepted opinions” (Durkheim, 1982). The aim of this paper is to describe the surrounding aspects and difficulties for western teachers to teach the important skill of “critical thinking” in China, and to provide a general point of reference about how to do it. Furthermore, this paper’s aim is to introduce the development of significant cultural changes in Chinese society in the last twenty-five years. This paper offers a theory of how these changes effect society Critical thinking learning capabilities are deeply related to the community identity and have a relevant influence on many social aspects such as: relationships, behaviour, communication and business. It is also crucial to foster them in design education to promote innovation and the development of emerging nations.

INTRODUCTION

...if a science of societies exists, one must certainly not expect it to consist of a mere paraphrase of traditional prejudices. It should rather cause us to see things in a different way from the ordinary man, for the purpose of any science is to make discoveries, and all such discoveries more or less upset accepted opinions. (Durkheim,-1982).

Over the course of two decades or so, China has become the world’s largest manufacturer for almost all products used. Design has become significantly important to the economies of many countries, including China, and it is no longer perceived as a cultural phenomenon prerogative of Western Countries. The

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Chinese Government after many years of emphasis on manufacturing has decided to move to a ‘higher’ goal; they had started to invest in design education and promoting a culture to encourage a new generation of Chinese designers. Western (dichotomy) education has always been perceived as valuable, due to the technological advancement of Western Countries. With the economic reform in China during the eighties and nineties, many western designers and design-related experts were invited to China to transfer their design knowledge and experience.

The author was fortunate enough to be invited to China as a Design *lǎoshī*, which means “teacher” in Chinese, or literally an “old person of skill”. I was a teacher in Raffles College of Design and Commerce in Shanghai, a collaboration between the Raffles Design Institute and the Dong Hua University. The college was a pioneer in the educational field, since it is one of the earliest approved Sino-Foreign joint venture schools in Shanghai. This position gave the author the opportunity to experience the beautiful Chinese culture, to understand the thoughts, aspirations and fears of a generation governed by the single-child policy. For western teachers and experts brought to China, it is fundamental to understand the cultural differences between the Western and the Far East society to be successful educators.

According to Guy, the definition of culture is “shared values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and language used within a social group” (Guy 1999, p. 7). The first logical assumption in this chapter identifies *de facto* that western educators and Chinese students do not share the same background and cultural values.

This could lead to misunderstandings due to different interpretations and attitudes, especially in the art disciplines. In addition, the rigid scholar system in China and the policy of “compartmentalization” contradicts the intention of the Chinese establishment to implement a western learning approach. The formation and implementation of the western learning approach, compared to the traditional educational system adopted in China, generates important issues in many scholarly situations especially in the areas that require independent thinking. Critical and creative thinking skills have been neglected in China as such subjects would require a more open cultural system to be effectively implemented.

BACKGROUND

The perception that a better education can determine an individual’s success in life is evident in China. Education prepares students with the expertise to intellectually and socially fit into a system to achieve a better personal situation, “Education is generally seen as the foundation of society which brings economic wealth, social prosperity and political stability” (Varun, 2014). In order to obtain such stability, the individual has been “shaped” and influenced to fit into this environment. His behavior, perceptions and assumptions, leads the individual into a socially acceptable manner of thinking (Marquardt, 1999). Clearly in the past decades the difficulties relating to the enforcement of a foreign educational system into China has been underrated. A skill such as critical thinking was not expected to have any relation to the cultural heritage if taught in a classroom. On the contrary, the ability to think critically maintains and reinforces a person’s cultural identity. The scholar system in China is inspired by Confucianism, which is not a religion as it does not have the metaphysics introduced later with the neo-Confucianism by Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, but it still has in his philosophy an intrinsic respect for authority and governance decisions (Lee, 2000). To the Confucian, harmony present in society and State corresponds to a universal whole, this assumption dovetails with the vision of the Communist Party. As Ellen Avrill (2009) illustrates as Cornell University Asian Art Curator, “during the Great Proletariat Revolution... [Art] ... Forced to serve political and propaganda purposes under enormous pressure from guidelines...”

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