

Chinese International Students at University of the Arts London: Changing perceptions on Creativity

Abstract

This research paper is an illuminative study on how Chinese students at the London College of Communication (LCC), University of the Arts London (UAL) perceive and experience creativity within themselves. It employs an ethnographic, insider, narrative and reflexive approach, where insider contextuality forms an important methodological layer of interpretation and analysis.

UAL is currently the 8th top recruiter of international students in the UK, and the only specialist art and design university in the top twenty. Chinese students are now the largest group of international students at UAL, with 4,000 graduates working and living in China, the university's largest alumni community outside Britain.

Through an initial series of conversational and relational interviews with a small sample of Chinese undergraduate students, fresh and diverse subjectivities and connections are discussed. Creativity becomes the lens that opens up a wider examination of students' motivations and experiences. Interviewees talk about their self-reflections, identities and personal creativity in a both discipline-based and more holistic contextual way: relating their personal experiences of coming to the UK, often citing the struggle and adjustment being away from family, with a new critical distance from the Chinese socio-cultural realities. The sense of self that arises from negotiating challenges of independence perhaps compels international students to become more resourceful, flexible, creative. In this way, creativity can be learned, taught and develops with life experience. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996)

This examination of creativity and agency of Chinese students indicates themes and insights for an expanded longitudinal ethnographic study over the course of their three year arts and design bachelor degrees. The research has also developed into a staff/student collaborative co-design project with an aim to explore and support Chinese creativity at UAL and beyond.

Please find a short video trailer accompanying the paper here:
<https://youtu.be/HFp06biW9iA>

Keywords: *Chinese Creativity, Insider research, Human-centred design thinking*

Context and Methodology

This illuminative study arises from a long standing interest and evolving relationship - personal, professional, artistic and ethnographic – with young Chinese creatives, and Chinese creativity in China and in the West. Brought up in a Chinese Canadian family context that did not value artistic, creative and expressive activities as anything more than a hobby, I have spent years asking myself similar questions to those I am now asking students through this research: what do you think creativity is, and do you think you are creative? In what way are you creative and how can you be supported to be more creative?

Susan Clegg encourages us to problematise and probe the nature of our own insider knowledge: “we are, as it were, studying ourselves” (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013) As such, the research methodology of this study: the identity, reflexivity, tacit assumptions and positionality of the researcher in relation to the interview subjects, forms an important layer of the research and analysis. “These understandings are formed through the researcher’s experience, enhanced by the perception of and dialogue with others, and his or her position in the world” (Drake, 2010)

In 2006 I started working as a creative director for an American-based experiential agency set up in Beijing China that had a couple of Olympic sponsor big brand client contracts. I was hired for my Western education, comfortable with North American and Chinese culture, customs and communication, and able to work across diverse mediums (architecture, events, video, exhibitions, interactive, entertainment). The company explicitly explained that local Chinese designers, even if educated abroad, did not have the creativity, vision and personality to handle international projects, budgets and clients. Perhaps as a consequence of this perception, most of the managing directors and creative directors in my company, and noticeably across many of the international creative agencies in Beijing and Shanghai at the time, were Westerners or overseas Chinese.

I worked with several young twenty-something local Chinese designers and production team members (graphics, illustration, 3D, animation and video) and would try different ways of communicating and giving direction to get more interesting results. I found that they took specific direction well, and were technically competent but did not seem to come up with bigger concepts, alternative options or new ideas very easily. I assumed that it was a cultural difference where Chinese were not brought up to ‘think outside of the box’ and consider things from shifting contexts and perspectives. As a director and mentor I was interested in how to encourage and develop more creative responses from these well-trained young Chinese designers.

In making the transition from creative director at a big four agency in Beijing, China, to a lecturer and course leader at LCC over a year ago, it has been fascinating to see where and how Chinese students of art and design are living and being educated, at UAL in London.

BA Design Management and Cultures is a fairly young course offered at LCC in response to emerging industry trends that see the growing demand for training in disciplines like design management, service design, strategic design, design innovation, marketing, leadership and entrepreneurship. It is a hybrid course that brings together strands of management, communications, design cultures and design practice. Therefore it promotes a broad view of design, embracing interdisciplinary, collaboration, business and creativity. I have been particularly interested to see the development of first and second year Chinese over the past year, some of whom were interviewed for this short research paper.

In our first meeting, I talked about the inspiration and motivation for this research. We discussed ethnographic research in the context of ‘design thinking’: where key learnings and skills revolve around live user research, empathy and discovery, co-design and iterative

redefinition of the research question or design challenge. We explicitly located this initial stage of research in the design thinking process, towards the development of a brief for a larger design project with an open-ended form and outcome.

Issue / Wider Context

UAL is currently the 8th top recruiter of international students in the UK, and the only specialist art and design university in the top 20. In 2014-15 almost 90 000 Chinese students studied in the UK, according to the HESA, which accounts for well over 10 billion pounds to the UK economy. The number of first year undergraduates from China in the UK, is now equal and surpassing the number of EU students. Chinese students are now the largest group of international students at UAL numbering 1,538 in 2014/15, with 4,000 graduates now working and living in China, now the university's largest alumni community outside Britain.

Across UAL, home and EU students average a higher level of attainment, with 67% and 69% respectively for achieving a 1st/2:1 degree marks, compared to 46% of international students (there is no separate statistic for Chinese international students). This is mirrored by 2015 HESA statistics which, in a study of finance and science undergraduate students, found this to be 68% of all students, compared to only 42% of students from China. While this gap in attainment could be due to a complexity of factors, including language proficiency and cultural approaches to learning, in the context of an art and design university, this is often addressed in terms of creativity.

It is commonly viewed, even echoed by myself, that Chinese students seem to 'lack creativity' or are somehow less creative than their western counterparts.

Chris Wainwright, deputy vice-chancellor of UAL is diplomatic in this 2015 interview for the South China Morning Post:

The systems of learning in the UK and Europe are very different...
I always try to ask Chinese students to relax a bit and be more experimental. If they don't produce a perfect [piece] but some interesting ideas, we can help them to develop those [ideas].
(Zhou, 2015)

Dr Yong Zhao, author of *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Dragon?* on Chinese creativity, asserts that the Chinese education system is "incapable of supporting individual strengths, cultivating a diversity of talents and fostering the capacity and confidence to create". Therefore, as China rapidly develops and requires innovators, thousands of students are being sent to the UK to learn "outside-the-box creativity". (Archer, 2015)

With many expert opinions, diverse voices, assumptions and cultural baggage - what can this research project attempt to add to the conversation?

The contextual motivation to this project is a real curiosity to examine and allow agency to whatever Chinese creativity is, on a personal and authentic level. The insight and subjectivities from the Chinese BA Students who come to UAL for at least three years to study on their undergraduate degrees, and sometimes go on to do MAs, are an excellent sample to study changing perceptions of creativity. I hope to be able to listen to my students' diverse lived experiences and emerging identities, from my proximity to students as a tutor, course leader and as an overseas Chinese in London at LCC and UAL.

Creativity

How do art and design students perceive the concept of creativity, and consider creativity in themselves? It is a very general question: one which invites infinite subjectivities and interpretations. Creativity has been the subject of intensive research and literature across a myriad of disciplines. It is UAL's raison d'être: we discover, foster, develop and teach creativity in art and design.

So what do we even mean by creativity?

Creativity can be generally defined as a phenomenon by which something new and valuable is formed. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, psychologist and current creativity pioneer distinguishes between three usages of the word, and focusses on creativity with a capital C referring to individuals who have changed some aspect of culture in a significant way. (1996)

For our purposes, I prefer Sir Ken Robinson's simple and holistic and inclusive definition of creativity as 'applied imagination':

Creativity draws from many powers that we all have by virtue of being human. And like many human capacities, our creative powers can be cultivated and refined. Doing that involves an increasing mastery of skills, knowledge, and ideas. (Robinson, 2014)

This research project attempts to capture the youthful emerging learning stages of these Chinese students' journeys towards discovering and developing their own creative capacities and talents.

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'Why Do Chinese Lack Creativity?'

In a popular Internet essay, one Chinese writer explains why the country remains behind the curve in innovation.

BY ANONYMOUS, TRANSLATED BY BETHANY ALLEN-EBRAHIMIAN | JUNE 23, 2015



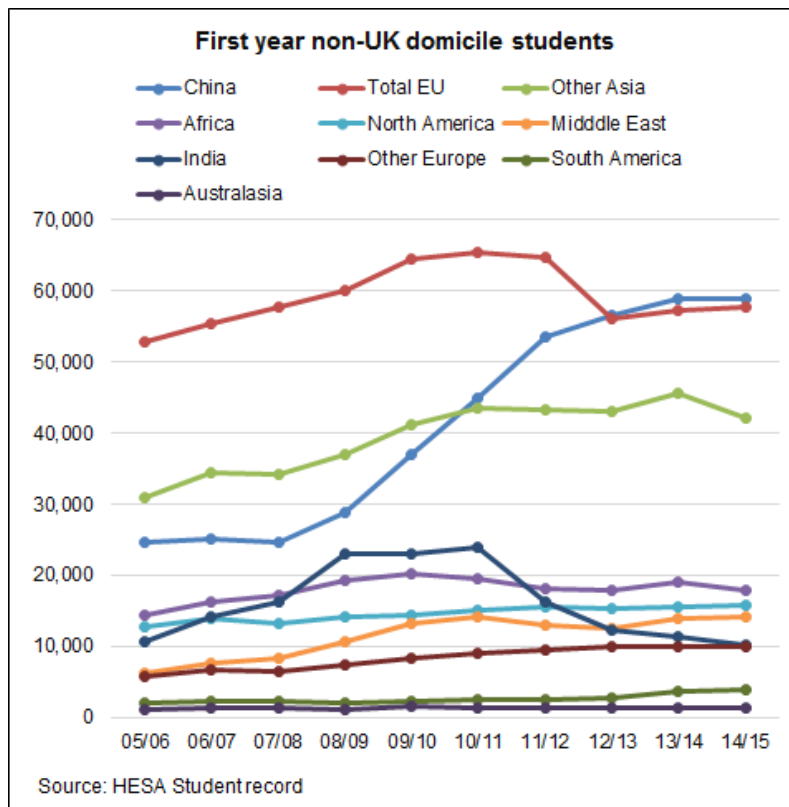
The image shows a man in a white shirt and dark trousers riding a motorized suitcase on a city street. The background is blurred, suggesting motion. The suitcase is a brown, rectangular box with a handle and a motor at the back. The man is looking forward, and the overall scene is captured in a dynamic, slightly out-of-focus manner.

Foreign Policy, 23 June 2015

Top 20 largest recruiters of international students 2014-15

Institution	postgraduate students	undergraduate students	Total number of international students
University College London	7,200	6,345	13,545
The University of Manchester	5,650	6,565	12,215
The University of Edinburgh	4,530	5,550	10,080
Coventry University	3,715	5,385	9,100
The University of Sheffield	4,485	3,965	8,450
Kings College, London	4,205	4,140	8,345
The University of Birmingham	5,780	2,520	8,300
University of the Arts, London	2,015	6,130	8,145
Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	4,235	3,730	7,965
The University of Warwick	3,695	3,730	7,425
The University of Oxford	5,190	2,155	7,345
The University of Glasgow	3,675	3,665	7,340
The University of Nottingham	3,075	4,170	7,245
The City University	4,205	3,000	7,205
London School of Economics and Political Science	4,995	2,055	7,050

UKCISA (2016)



<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/free-statistics>

Results and Discussion

These interviews of international students Chinese women, similar in age, on the same course, still present a diversity and depth of perception in regards to creativity. While certain aspects of their backgrounds and experiences are comparable, their values, motivations, practices and identities around creativity seem quite different.

When first asked “Are you creative?”, Interviewees initially responded with humility and self-doubt, referring to the conventional understanding of creativity to refer to visual design skills.

I feel that I’m kind of creative, but not really creative cause I’m not a designer. (Student C)

I’m not sure if I’m a creative person, but I want to be a creative person...I’m doing an internship for a small company and the director always said I’m a creative person. Before that I never thought I was creative person. Is that because (they) didn’t pay me and that’s why they said that to me? (Student B)

However through the conversations, the interviewees each started to talk about their own self-perceptions and personal creativity in a more holistic and contextual way, related to their personal experiences of coming to the UK, often citing the hardship and adjustment of the first year away from family and China. Perhaps just the act and experience of coming to a completely different culture, negotiating the changes and challenges of independence, college requirements and the English language compels international students to be more resourceful and therefore enhances creativity. “Therefore creativity does not happen inside peoples’ heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) In this way, creativity can be learned and taught, and seems to develop with life experience.

Student B reflects on her changing identity and recognizes that she is becoming a more creative person.

When I start to study here, people around me they are changing me. They keep talking creativity and design and how to be yourself, how to represent your personality. It stated to get me thinking about my personality, how I want to be, who I want to be in the future.

Student A talked about the experience of isolation when she first came to the UK, and the differences she often notices in daily life activities between the UK and China.

Yes, absolutely I’m creative in that way. I always compare... Especially when I talk to my parents... because I have a different experience here, then in China.

Student A would often pause to think, perhaps translate and censor herself. “Things happen in people’s heads during the interviews that are not recorded,” (Drake, 2015) With tacit insight into Chinese society, I sensed that she was careful and measured with her responses, most likely due to her family situation as her parent’s work for the military, which necessitates privacy.

I’m not sure. It’s really complicated... There are lots of troubles in my life that makes me I think designing services are really important for a

brand, and for people like me

When asked: what is creativity to you, the student's responses were markedly different and seemed to show how each of them is starting to develop an area of interest: to explore and define a different field. Csikszentmihalyi says that "a person cannot be creative in a domain to which he or she is not exposed.... Creativity can be manifested only in existing domains or fields." (1996)

Student A has become interested and inspired by the idea of designing experiences and services, and using design and creativity to effect change.

You mean in this world? I think creativity is from real life... Especially when you consider design as a tool to solve some problem, then you begin thinking. That's the point is to get people thinking about their life...For now I think design is not just design. It's about a revolution. You think something needs to be changed and it's not about something beautiful or gorgeous.

While Student B describes a creative person as someone who can take risks and displays characteristics of an entrepreneur and leader:

I think creative should be that you have ability to take control of everything and you make and decide the direction that you... or your company should take and you can explain why, and after people will follow you and you can give them a good result.

The last question asked in the interviews related briefly to what the students thought could help them (or other Chinese students) be more creative in the university context. As expected, all three of the students mentioned more tutorials, however the responses were actually quite interesting and illuminative. They spoke of the value of mentorship and guidance, the external validation by tutors (or achieving good grades) being 'creative' as helpful, and that the creative cultural environment of London as being stimulating.

Student A: I think more tutorials, one-to-one. Especially for those who don't understand course work, project work...

Interviewer: Could this be from older students?

Student A: Yes, maybe...

Student B: More tutorials and projects that are relevant to my future.

Student C: I think because some Chinese students come here and are not clear what they are doing. Or maybe they don't know what is the pathway of their future. Or they may be confused being in London, in a foreign country. So I think that tutorials are more important....

In comparison with universities in America, they have many optional classes, which we don't have here. For instance, maybe I would like to learn a foreign language... another language, but I have to pay! The purpose should be to gain skills...We lack extracurricular activities here.

Future Developments

Many insights and directions could be extracted from this short study. To expand the research into a longitudinal study of students across their three years at UAL, would be useful for educators and creatives. This would require a re-framing of the research question

and further analysis of methodological considerations.

Since this initial research less than six months ago, a group of lecturers, tutors and students at LCC and UAL have expressed interest in developing a collaborative design project around exploring Chinese creativity and innovation, encouraging further research, discussion and creating networks across disciplines and cultures. The initial meetings and event will take place in autumn 2016.

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