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Zoom in on the Get-in-Touch Project and Travel-Study to China

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Abstract

This article features a creative fabrication project assigned to participants in a short-term education abroad program at a Midwestern state university in the US. The Get-in-Touch assignment merged intercultural research and studio work to enrich and transform participants' travel experience in China. Several aesthetic stances (mimetic, formalistic, and contextualist) were adopted to interpret the three-dimensional projects documented with photocollages and stories in this manuscript. Travel-study provided a dynamic platform that allowed the four participants to manifest intercultural learning outcomes: making the dissimilar similar, making the unfamiliar familiar, making the familiar unfamiliar and making the similar dissimilar. This article further illuminates the aesthetic stances noted above through the work of four contemporary Chinese artists and offers an indirect glimpse into the art school curricula found in higher education in both cultures. The discussion highlights learned lessons of cultural humility.

Prelude

At the November 2018 inaugural Bloomberg New Economy Forum held in Singapore, Henry Kissinger indicated that the US has a limited understanding of the Chinese mindset. He joked that the Chinese, in contrast, possess a comprehensive understanding of their opponent at the negotiating table, having read all his publications. The veteran of Sino–U.S. diplomacy also soberly reminded leaders of the world’s two largest economic systems, entangled in an escalating trade war, to learn to adapt to the other’s presence to avoid chaos in the global order and prevent major disruptions to the workings of an interconnected world.

Effective dialogue, respect, and tolerance are imperative to sustain the development of peaceful, empathetic communication in a globalized world of diverse cultures and communities. To appreciate the immensity of such diversity, younger generations in all cultures must recognize its scope and deepen their understanding of one another’s worldviews. The arts in each culture exemplify aesthetic differences. Cultural artifacts and historical relics demonstrate how evolving worldviews have impacted the vast multidimensional cultural landscapes across the globe. Discovering the past provides a viable means to better understand the present in order to envision and co-construct a vibrant future of coexistence. Early proponents of arts education (Feldman, 1970; Read, 1955) strongly advocated for diversity in the arts to enrich the lives of young people coming of age in an array of social circumstances, cultural backgrounds, and educational systems.

The case study in this manuscript highlights a three-dimensional (3D) creative fabrication project and a U.S. travel–study to China program in higher education. This three-time (2012, 2014, 2016) faculty-led program was framed by a synergy of recent trends in global education and experiential learning. Multiple techniques were adopted to collect data, and photocollages were incorporated for visual analysis and representation. Research findings showcase four *Get-in-Touch* projects undergirded by various aesthetic stances to illuminate how these works served as a manifesto of the student travelers’ intercultural learning outcomes. In addition, this article sheds light on these aesthetic stances through the work of four contemporary Chinese artists and offers a glimpse of the art school curricula found in higher education in both cultures. The conclusion draws attention to the lessons participants learned.



Figure 1. Three travel-study trips to China (2012, 2014, 2016)

Synergetic Educational Trends

Global education has proliferated in the new millennium. Numerous student exchanges and study abroad programs at various levels have been established even as the internationalization of curricula at home has blossomed (Lewin, 2009). To meet the demands of a new workforce for the global economy and to resolve planet-wide issues, the goals of future educational trends must converge to cultivate innovative and creative problem solvers with global perspectives (Zhao & Gearin, 2018).

Emerging Trends in Global Education

The U.S. Department of Education has created several multimillion-dollar scholarship

endowments by partnering with industries across national borders to help aspiring young U.S. students travel to various parts of the globe to advance their study. Several US-based organizations and foundations (e.g., Freeman, Luce, and Starr) have also established attractive scholarship packages to encourage applications in the arts, humanities, and foreign languages. According to *Open Doors*, the fast fact sheet from the Institute of International Education (2018), short-term programs (summer or eight weeks or less) have increasingly gained popularity.

A prolonged period during the college years to study abroad is unavailable to most U.S. students because they lack resources to cover extended trips (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2009). College students typically hold part-time jobs during the academic year to cover basic living expenses and work full-time during summers to accumulate tuition money. An academic year or even a semester away is an unlikely extra commitment. Minors in secondary school settings have not been permitted to extend visits abroad without parental guidance and adult supervision; they have also faced restrictions as exchange students, encountering limited exposure to authentic local cultures. Meaningful local connections are regrettably minimal.

Besides the diluting of the once pivotal mission of initiating meaningful enculturation, other significant and complex issues have often been trivialized or truncated in short-term education abroad. These critical issues warrant time and effort to explore, study, and understand their nuances, including climate change, human rights, and global power dynamic structures (Bourn, 2015). However, with the enthusiasm for vocational training and job preparation folded into advocacy for education abroad, most program organizers today lean toward launching short-term, discipline-specific, faculty-led trips. The latter became necessary after reports revealed that commercially oriented offerings for education abroad have regrettably undermined intercultural education goals and purposes during planning and post-travel assessment with the actual trips often heedlessly left to local guides at the last minute (Vande Berg et al., 2012).

A temporary “culture of dealing” (Holliday et al., 2010, p. 29) emerging from the communication pattern in such settings is almost unavoidable. To curtail its damaging effects of projecting stereotypes and othering, engendering cultural humility among participants is critical. Instead of acquiring a state of knowledge or achieving a set of problem-solving skills as advocated by cultural competence theory, cultural humility focuses on self-humility (Hook et al., 2017). Inherent power dynamics underlying brief encounters during travels may impede relationship building. Covert assumptions and unspoken biases, often undetected by both hosts and guests, must be minimized to ensure smoother communication traffic for idea exchanges. Self-humility offers the key to sharpen cultural awareness with reflective sensibility to recognize and tolerate differences, and to perceive each brief encounter as an

opportunity for growth.

Experiential Learning and Aesthetic Study in Higher Education

Another recent trend in contemporary educational reform is experiential learning in the context of higher education (Roberts, 2015). Dynamic learning platforms constructed with an experiential education framework are justifiable, especially for adult students who value the experience of networking with like-minded others. Personal reflection after practice and engagement outside the academic classroom is also a more effective approach to strengthen the continued development of personal and cultural identities (Kegan, 1994). During education abroad, when students are forced from their comfort zones to employ manifold facets of their intelligence to meet challenges in multiple settings, learning becomes boundary-crossing, which is a key characteristic of expansive learning (Engestrom, 2009).

Expanding the scope and depth of cultural learning by engaging students meaningfully in, through, and with the arts has been part of the noble mission of liberal arts education since its inception (Stearns, 2009). Young people can easily exoticize their encounters in foreign countries, especially on their first trip abroad. Better assessment is needed to investigate their learning outcomes instead of assuming that intercultural understanding can be readily acquired after a single trip. Moreover, the dilution of art history in education abroad programs poses additional challenges; chronological delivery is ineffective, while sporadic introduction at heritage sites often leads to decontextualization of historical information because of time constraints.

Incorporating a creative 3D fabrication project into an education abroad program has considerable potential as a viable evaluation component of such programs. The topic of aesthetics studies has been introduced in multiple art education settings since the late 1970s, when the field embraced the four disciplines in art (Lankford, 1992; Steward, 1997). Aesthetics as a philosophical branch may not necessarily have been incorporated into the coursework requirements for collegiate fine arts students to the same degree that art history and art criticism have been. A parallel universe seems to exist in higher education in which art school graduates struggle to balance institutionalized art concepts for their career in artistic creation and current conventions in the contemporary art world. The pedagogical strategies of contemporary art education (Marshall & Donahue, 2014) can provide a balancing mechanism with personally selected themes and topics, subject matter, form, and symbols as well as methods for aesthetic study.

When the wave of visual culture swept the field of art education at the turn of the millennium, the debate over a new, rising form of aesthetic senses dominated the agenda of national conventions. Inquiries into popular and mass culture items and phenomena associated with

consumption patterns and mass media were often reframed and scrutinized by critical theories (Duncum, 2007). In recent years, scholars have tried to adopt innovative strategies to scrutinize human intersubjectivity by exploring the relationship of people with objects (Choi, 2013) and in places—even the cemetery became a site to introduce aesthetic inquiry to art teacher preparation coursework in higher education (Huerta, 2016).

The Get-in-Touch Project: Another Case Study

This curriculum case study is one of a trilogy examining specially designed assignments in a travel–study to China program that was offered in conjunction with two semester-long courses at a Midwestern state university in the US. The case study method (Ying, 2009) provided the program developers and other stakeholders with an in-depth account and analysis (Davenport & O’Connor, 2014) of how a specific assignment when integrated with sequential learning activities could accentuate or impede the travel and study experienced by participants. Other assignments, such as the *I See You* project, showcased the uniqueness and obstacles of cross-border artmaking (Kan & McWhorter, 2015); and the *Made-in-China* project featured critical tourism and glocal artmaking (Lai & Kan, 2000).

The three studies share two research questions:

- How does the travel–study program expand students’ understanding of Chinese arts and culture through this assignment?
- How do students manifest more open mindedness and show developing interest in Chinese arts and culture?

All three studies shared the data collected from multiple sources and involved the techniques described here. Primary data sources included the two instructors’ participant-observation records and travel logs during the three trips to China with extensive photo documentation. Some videography was also attempted to document the curriculum in action. Special attention was paid to the formal critique sessions held at various Chinese universities during the trips as the students from both cultures showed their artwork and shared artist statements. Other visual materials collected included students’ voluntary contributions of photos or digital printout copies of their in-progress artworks. Written materials for inspection included the course syllabi, assignments outline, teaching materials, and students’ portfolios submitted to a Blackboard site.

More than 30 students—a mix of art and non-art majors—participated in three travel–study trips to China (2012, 2014, 2016). Several types of data were collected from them: (a) a short post-trip survey via email at the end of the semester; (b) semi-structured interviews conducted with several art instructors and students of both cultures, focusing on their perceived and experienced curriculum as well as the joint ventures; and (c) informal and ad hoc interviews

meant to clarify observations and impromptu interpretations during the overseas trips. The four stories featured in the following section were crafted referencing this set of data to triangulate the other primary data sources.

Both courses were divided into three parts: Participants had ten weeks to conduct individual research prior to their 12-day trip to China during spring break. Upon returning, participants had about three weeks to complete their research work and mount a post-travel exhibition. Sequential learning activities during the initial phase helped participants gradually establish intercultural communication skills, such as getting in touch with locals to negotiate meaning and subsequently adjust points of reference before proceeding to the final draft and actual 3D fabrication. Months of email correspondence with their assigned counterpart, peer review, and formal presentations via videoconference supported participants' rigorous research before their exposure to cultural artifacts at heritage sites and later their culminating experience in visual narratives in the post-travel exhibition. Such interactive strategies and methods have been widely used in educational settings to promote cultural awareness and global understanding across national borders (Chia et al., 2011; Eristi, 2009).

A few overarching themes were prescribed at the inception to guide participants' 3D creative fabrication: celebrate local traditions, reconstruct historical narrative, engender ecological consciousness, partake in communal rituals, and foster global consensus. This project also allowed majors in fields other than art to research and recreate local cuisines and traditional dishes in mixed media and inexpensive self-drying clay. Endless possibilities could occur as the replication switched from engaging one sense to another, from gustatory to visual and back again when they tasted the actual dish during the trip.

How the Get-in-Touch Project Enriched Student Travelers' Life Story

The four projects described in this section were selected from a collection of digital portfolios assembled after three travel–study trips. They were contributed by one male participant (from a total of only seven on the three trips), one nontraditional undergraduate student, one graduate student holding a full-time job, and a Chinese international undergraduate, who could provide an emic perspective. This was a purposeful selection to honor the diversity of the U.S. participants in this travel–study program, despite the report of the Institute of International Education (2018) that a vast majority of participants in study–abroad programs were female students from White middle-class backgrounds.

These narratives were reconstructed based on observation notes during the trip and my impressions interacting with the four student travelers while serving as one of the course instructors. I have been cautious to avoid reducing their relationships with host students to simple causal factors in terms of an end product because I recognized the unbalanced power

dynamics inherent in the joint-venture—my students would earn grades and credits for their participation, but their counterparts from Chinese universities participated voluntarily. Moreover, together with other faculty members from both cultures, I had no intention of policing the students' online interactions (Kan & McWhorter, 2015).

Christine's Story

Returning to complete her undergraduate education after decades away from school, Christine not only appreciated the opportunity to experience the scope and depth of Chinese culture through travel–study but also found her relationships with younger fellow travelers, about the age of her grandchildren, equally gratifying. She enrolled in the program twice, visiting China in 2012 and 2014. To align travel coursework with her life-long learning goals, she researched Qilin (麒麟), an unfamiliar mystical animal of Chinese legend, and fabricated a version of this hybrid creature with her preferred familiar material: clay. She based her work on images collected on her own and interpretation of stories that Pengpeng, her Chinese counterpart, shared with her. In return, Pengpeng, a product design student, created a CAD rendering of a cultural symbol dear to Christine—the Celtic cross—although it began as an unfamiliar artifact with unknown meaning to him before their interactions.



Figure 2. Christine's Qilin

An auspicious creature, Qilin embodies deep cultural meaning as a symbol familiar to Christine's Chinese audience, one that appears in many tales and folklore. Believing that Qilin can bring children to the family and cause them to flourish, the Chinese people present locked Qilin boxes to children, especially at birth, to guard their lives. Qilin is also a favorite decoration found on ceilings and doors to signal the family's nobility and to eliminate evil spirits; it is a folk alternative to the almighty dragon, another hybrid creature. Qilin originated because the common people were forbidden to use the dragon, designated as an absolute symbol of the emperor, exclusively serving the royal. Historical prohibition of adopting the dragon's representation was linked to accusations of plotting revolt in many Chinese dynasties and tragically resulted in the brutal persecution of entire clans. Qilin eventually emerged as a folk version of the dragon, allowing commoners to use it without fear of punishment.

After firing, Christine spent numerous hours painting the figure and matching the right kind of glaze to achieve accuracy in all its details. She did not openly share the reason for choosing this legendary animal previously unfamiliar to her. As her instructor but only about half her age, I never probed her steadfastness in fabricating a Chinese Qilin, but I admired its intricate details and thoroughly respected the time and energy she dedicated to perfecting every aspect of its making. Much later, after I overheard a conversation regarding Christine's loss of an infant grandchild years ago, I came to believe that the Qilin, which now proudly sits in the middle of her living room, serves as an emblem of the release of grief and perhaps brings her hope and peace of mind.

Carol's Story

Researching Chinese armor dated 1000 BCE, art education graduate student Carol found that early protection for soldiers comprised tortoise shells strung together with leather cording. Bronze, leather, chain mail, and even layers of mulberry paper were subsequently used but were reserved exclusively for the nobility. The 1974 unearthing of the Terracotta Army in Xi'an revealed that many soldiers wore lamellar which is thick quadrangular plate armor riveted together (Dien, 1981, 2000).

Historical research inspired Carol to apply her ceramics and jewelry-making skills to fabricate three pieces of "armor" made with clay, metal, and stacked handmade papers. In her artist statement, she provided the rationale:

The Terra Cotta Army [as a whole] is awe-inspiring in itself, but the figures that fascinated me were the archers, crouching, poised and covered in plate armor. . . . Their repetitious and overlapping designs, seems impenetrable. I kept that protective, plate-like feel with a decorative and elegant focus in all three pieces.

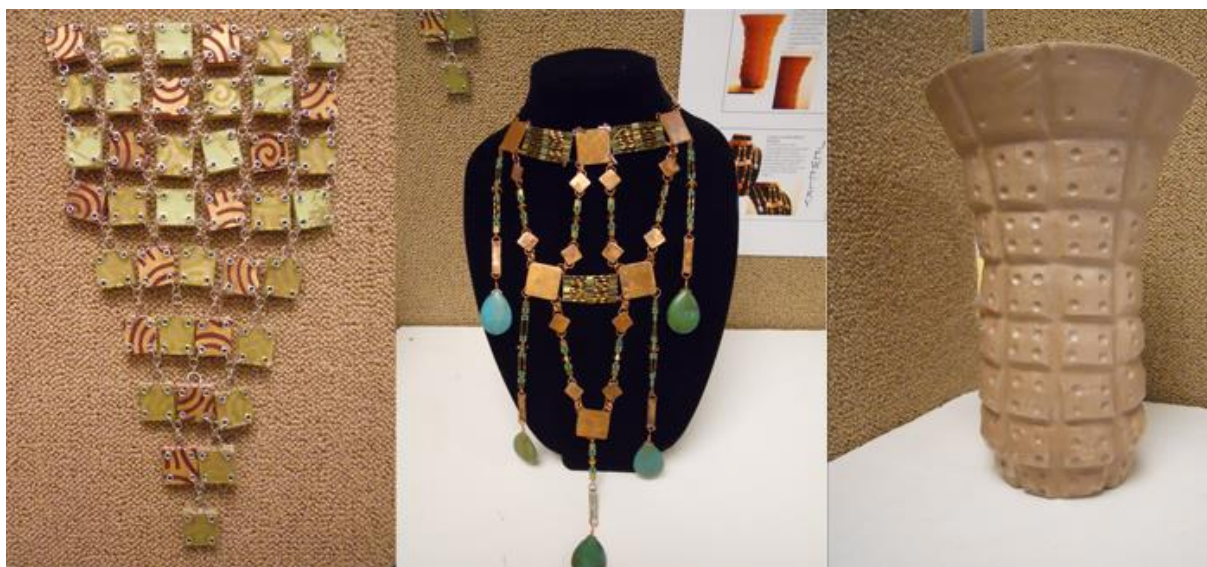


Figure 3. Carol's Armor

For her ceramic vase and wearable jewelry pieces, Carol adopted a formalist approach, extracting the texture from the armor and manifesting the principle of repetition in highly appealing artifacts. During videoconferencing, Carol's presentation amazed many in the audience, especially her Chinese counterpart Wenwen, a graduate student in Chinese painting. The Chinese art students knew all about her subject matter—the Terracotta Army—and were also familiar with her theme of protection; however, their familiarity had stifled their creativity, causing them to become indifferent to the figures as art content. Carol's original fabrications successfully integrated dissimilar projections of values—awe from her fellow travelers and a blasé attitude from her hosts—on a renowned cultural artifact.

In addition to creating these works inspired by armor prior to her travel, Carol was highly productive after returning from China. Those few weeks were a hectic period for everyone, overcoming jet lag and recovering from flu-like symptoms caused by smog. She was particularly swamped, juggling course requirements and her own work at a community center serving adult students with severe physical and emotional needs. At the post-travel exhibition, Carol surprised everyone by pulling out an additional ink and wash painting in a style somewhat similar to that of Chinese classical landscape; hers was done on an inexpensive long scroll of rice paper she had purchased in Beijing as a souvenir.

In communications long after the trip, Carol's counterpart Wenwen provided and translated the Chinese characters 艺术是人生 that Carol traced onto her painting—Art is Life. The phrase captured a certain longing for simplicity and yearning for proximity to nature, a sort of Arcadian principle embraced by all traditional Chinese intellectuals. Considerable differences

in the two graduate students' lives, upbringing, and education unexpectedly converged in this manifesto. Carol's creative work encapsulated a worthiness that art students from both East and West could appreciate and treasure, that is, the celebration of the invaluable creative impulse amid one's chaotic life.

Matthew's Story

Matthew, a dual major who specialized in oil painting and metal sculpture construction, had a clear vision prior to his travel. Of his ambitious plan he said the following:

I want to bring pieces of Kent [Ohio] to China with me—the Kent Bog is famous for being a special region where it has been glaciated and left a unique environment with unique plants and trees. . . . The materials—bark, wood sticks, twigs, and rocks—are unique to the environment because the glaciated kettle lake formation created a cold acidic place.

Landscape painting is a ubiquitous genre for art students everywhere despite myriad cultural differences in depictions. Familiar and scenic surroundings constitute typical subject matter for professional painters as well as amateurs and beginners. Matthew had two counterparts, Yongyong and Yanyan, both well-trained in realistic representation of their environment as well as the elements and principles of good scenery composition. Their representations were framed by their artistic visions polished during years of art training: Yongyong's ink scroll emulated Chinese painters of the most popular genre—Mountain-water—and Yanyan's adoption of a classical Western aesthetic stance of sublimation focused her expression in thick oil impasto applied with a palette knife.

In targeting 3D fabrication, Matthew had to stretch his own art-making experience to expand his artistic cognition to transform a familiar subject like landscape. To emphasize the uniqueness of his treatment of the subject, Matthew collected layers of undergrowth and made quick sketches during numerous walks in the Bog, a regional park, carefully sorting and layering his collection inside a dozen uniformly-sized glass jars. At first glance, the jars partially resembled biology lab specimens, but they also reminded viewers of spices stored in a kitchen pantry. Coincidentally, Matthew had worked as a restaurant cook since his senior year in high school to fund his college education.

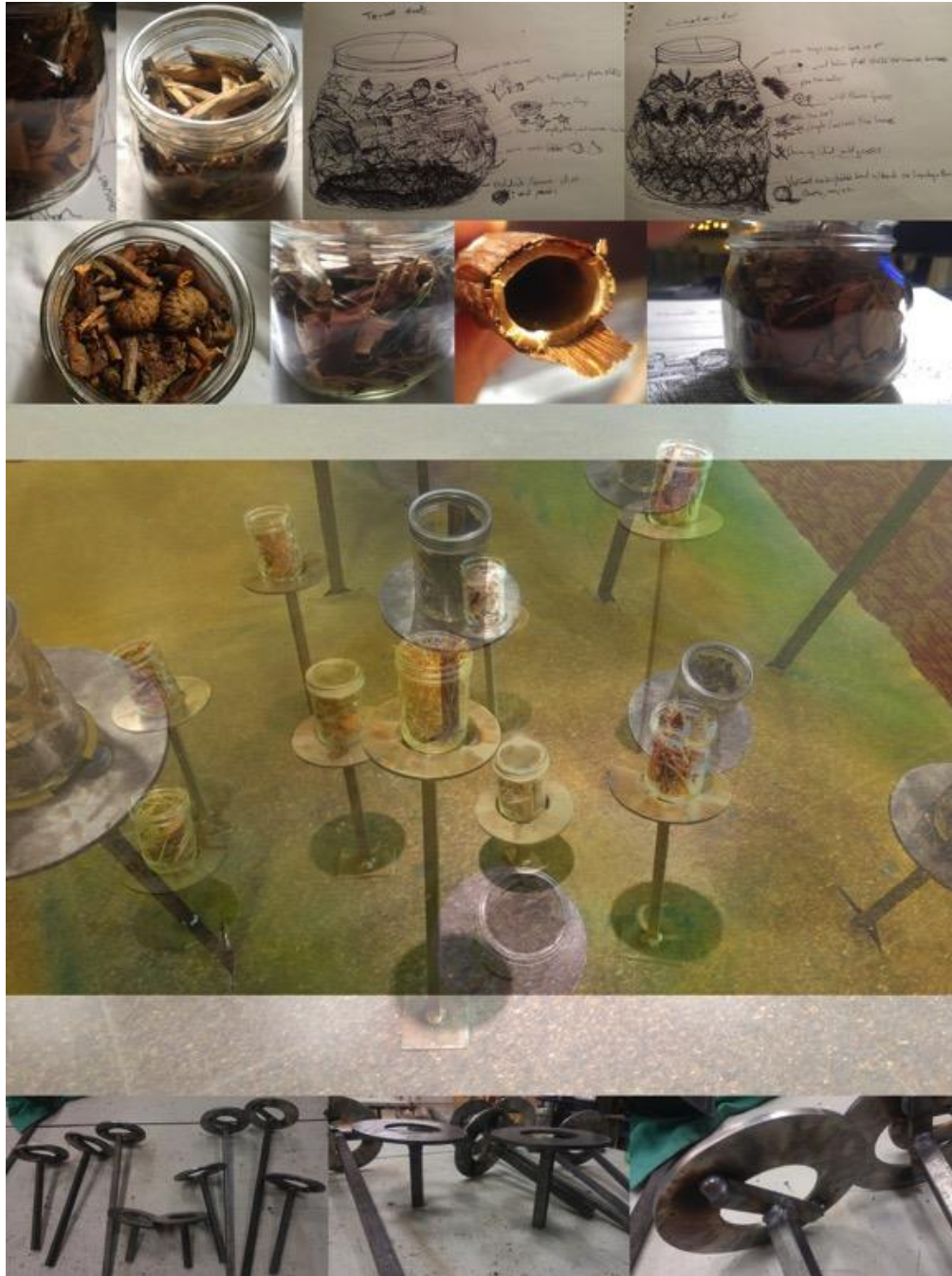


Figure 4. Matthew's Kent Bog

To showcase his collection at the exhibition, he designed and welded 10 industrial metal rings to steel rods of various lengths, making stands to hold the 10 glass jars. They were presented as a collective whole in various formations—the result of both creative improvisation and careful consideration of the surrounding atmosphere as well as the conditions of the exhibition ground. Matthew also completed sketches and took photographs to record the entirety of his

endeavors and brought two jars of already decayed organic matter to China and shared them with his counterparts

One morning after our overnight trip from Beijing to Xi'an on the high-speed train, Matthew, staring at the rapid disappearance of dew droplets dangling on the outside of the windowpane, explained that Kent Bog is a place that he and his girlfriend frequented together after art class. The two art students wanted to travel together, but she could not leave her job to accompany him over spring break. I suspected his meticulous collection and display of jars could be his intimate and personal way of bringing his companion along on this journey, perhaps concealing more sentiment than merely showing off his favorite familiar place in Kent to his Chinese counterparts.

Barbara's Story

Barbara joined in travel–study to visit her home country in search of new perspectives and inspiration. Growing up in one of China's western provinces far from our travel destination—and like millions of single-child families in China with parents working in distant cities—she was raised by her grandmother. This jewelry metal major fabricated a bracelet before the trip and a necklace after, both incorporating two popular motifs in Chinese culture—the moon and flowers. Her simple artist statement explained the significance:

The 15th day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar marks the Moon Festival, or the Midautumn Festival. The round shape of the full moon symbolizes family reunion, and [this Chinese public] holiday is for family members to get together and enjoy the full moon—an auspicious token of abundance, harmony, and luck.

The moon and flowers are indeed staple ornaments; their literal and metaphorical meanings are omnipresent in Chinese classics and expressed through various art forms including music, dance, poetry, and prose. At the G20 Hangzhou Summit held in in 2016, the Chinese folk song “Round Moon and Beautiful Flowers” closed the gala dinner and performance before the final fireworks show. Such popular motifs also traditionally embellish countless items in both fine and folk art—from fashion to building decoration across time to signature representation by generations of artists. These visual symbols represent the regularly changing seasons, natural phenomena serving as effective reminders of prosperity and unity.

Barbara's first bracelet included several individually cut out metallic circles of less than an inch welded into a line, with miniature flowers carefully patinated onto each piece of metal. She then used space-rivets to enable the top portion of each circle to spin, reminiscent of constant lunar motion. Beyond mere decoration, the flowers were chosen for their symbolic cultural meaning linked to integrity and virtues, exemplified by the classical Four Gentlemen

(plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum).

The formation of our learning community benefited from Barbara's insider knowledge of Chinese cultural norms and beliefs. She always tactfully supplied the right dose of contextual information necessary for us to maneuver through complex situations and avoid unnecessary conflicts with our Chinese counterparts. In multiple settings, her insights helped defuse heated debates and arguments among us travelers of varied backgrounds with our own cultural baggage. The necklace fashioned after the trip revealed her subtler sense of cultural pride. She used laser cutters to complement her improving skills in handling conventional metalsmithing tools. Her second visual formula, entitled *Embracing Differences*, included similar motifs but invited viewers on a more complex journey to decoding.



Figure 5. Barbara's Moon and Flowers

How Aesthetic Stances Bridged Intercultural Sensitivities

Regardless of dissimilarity in contexts or immeasurable differences in literal motifs and specific associations with origins of indigenous artifacts and icons (Campbell, 1968), the arts cherished by people of varied cultures across time hold immense potential to serve as an inspiration for young people to draw out intricate personal meanings to enrich their experience as well as to support the continued development of their personal identity. This creative fabrication assignment built into travel–study offered additional potential, whereby sensual contact in situ can impact perception and strengthen the building of intrinsic aesthetic sensibilities. Starting from tangible cultural icons and visual symbols and then extending to decipher their inherent and contextual meanings along with associated values also constitute a beneficial approach to accelerate acceptance and adjustment of cultural differences, hence fostering intercultural sensitivities.

Based on self-selected topics or themes, these four projects yielded a synthesis of the visual and narrative, illustrating personal journeys of intercultural learning. The participants foremost demonstrated professionalism as college art students with adequate training and proficiency in handling the variety of materials used to bring satisfactory closure to the open-ended assignments through their 3D fabrications. I would not, however, set up these projects as illustrative of artistic growth or assessment of cultural competence. Most importantly, by no means did my interpretations of these work through the chosen aesthetic stances perpetuate the undesirable essentialist viewpoint of culture to project the Chinese culture as static or exotic.

Mimetics: Learning to Make the Unfamiliar Familiar

Christine carefully integrated the findings of her research into an unfamiliar subject and a body of constructed knowledge based on encounters and interactions with people, places, and cultural artifacts during her travels into an output familiar to her Chinese audience. Her figurative modeling of the Qilin can be considered a realistic representation even though this imaginative creature does not exist; however, countless images of it are now easily available via Internet search engines. Hence, the realism with which her subject matter was portrayed allows the work to be judged via a mimetic stance.

Christine had another reference framework: She mentioned the 31-foot marble sculpture known as *The Stone of Hope* at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial in Washington, DC. This work by Chinese sculptor Lai Yixin was selected as the winner of a 2011 design competition. In addition, while traveling in Chinese cities, we encountered numerous monuments in public squares created in the style of Russian social realism. This movement in art permeated the Chinese art world in the mid-20th century (Lu, 2010), when Abstract Expressionism occupied the Western art world. Chinese art school graduates specializing in

the sculpture track were well prepared to copy from and stylize nature and reality.

Imitation was easily dismissed as naïve and old-school in the West, associated with 19th-century academic drawing based on plaster casts of classical Greek and Roman sculptures (Newall, 2019). It continued to hold enormous promise as an effective training method into the 1950s to include still-life drawing and human figure drawing from live models. Other than the short rise of photorealism in the late 1980s, maintaining a mimetic stance as a viable approach to making significant contributions in the contemporary art world is highly challenged at present. Art educators from both cultures can nevertheless agree that mimicking is a useful familiarization technique, a cushioned step along the rough road of artistic pursuit, especially when the learning curve for the hands to catch up with the eyes is steep at the outset.

During the mimetic process, features of the unfamiliar gradually become familiar. Such artistic training of the eyes has considerable capacity to polish and alter perception both psychologically and mentally. This aesthetic stance offers great promise in helping student travelers plan their first step when they set out on the journey of enculturation in a foreign land.

Formalism: Learning to Make the Dissimilar Similar

Carol's 3D creative pursuits were bolstered by formalism. All her works were backed by a set of agreeable truisms in visual art language—the elements and principles of art and design. One reason that her creative research complemented the formalistic discourse involved her conversion of dissimilar perspectives and approaches in artmaking into sophisticated artistic answers: Her armor manifested as a triumph of form whereby both the repeat-pattern principle and the textural element won the spectators' attention.

Today, a systematic introduction of art and design elements and principles has become the beginning practice underlying foundational courses in Chinese colleges of art besides training in realistic representations. For half of a century, formalism has enchanted a generation of Chinese artists, especially those who have traveled overseas (to Europe and the US) to study art and later returned to teach art in schools. Despite regular criticism as meaningless and removed from common people's lives, art for art's sake and theories of formalism have periodically served as a useful rebuttal to the overbearing intrusion of modern commercialism and capitalism in a civilization with 4,000 years of past glory (Lu, 2010). Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010), an influential Chinese artist who helmed one such school of thought, emphasized that art should not be devoid of life.

Formalism in art also provided a basic training for foundational programs in the American

undergraduate educational structure (Newall, 2019). Such a generalized foundation can be traced back to the German Bauhaus workshops at the beginning of the last century. When many Bauhaus instructors fled war-torn Europe for the US in mid-century, they brought along the concepts and methods of such elementary training in the plastic arts while serving on faculties in art schools. Thus, young artists from both cultures were committed to the acquisition of formalism along almost parallel tracks.

One should note that during numerous face-to-face meetings of our participants, both guests and hosts excitedly recalled undergoing college foundational courses to learn the identical seven elements and seven principles of art and design. Such formalistic training experience connected guests and hosts. The adoption of this common visual language drew everyone closer to honor the creative expression, regardless of concept, topic, or theme.

Contextualism: Learning to Make the Familiar Unfamiliar

Matthew's juxtaposition of organic substances with mass-produced inexpensive glass jars and scrap metal also relayed his strong message of the possibility of the disappearing landscape replaced by artificial construction. His statement was an outcry: "We are heading toward doomsday, surrounded by concrete, living in a milieu characterized by complete alienation if humans continue to destroy their surrounding environment and exploit the earth." His work thus fits into the contextualist stance in contemporary aesthetic concepts.

In one view of contextualism, emphasis is placed on the message of the artwork and its significant aspects as well as the value of art and its capacity to change the way people think, believe, or behave. Art now is championed by individual artists who respond and react to collective issues with personal artistic statements, messages, and unique communication. The Chinese contemporary artist most noted for this stance is none other than Ai Weiwei, who demonstrated this logic through his powerful activist art (Saatch, 2008; Vine, 2008). For his *Sunflower Seeds*, installed at the Tate Modern in London, he enlisted the help of thousands of Chinese ceramic workers to handcraft and paint more than ten million tiny porcelain seeds, enough to carpet the entire gallery. The sheer number and size created an overwhelming effect that helped get the activist–artist's message across to the audience: He had brilliantly converted the familiar into an unfamiliar encounter.

This strategy was often championed by avant-gardes to engage an indifferent audience, who required unpredictability and surprise to slow down and grasp the message from works of art (Fineberg, 1995). In learning to make the familiar unfamiliar, contextualism offers student travelers a gentle reminder that intercultural learning includes being mindful of what happens in one's own backyard.

Another Contextualist's Stance: Making the Similar Dissimilar

Working on familiar cultural motifs and subject matter without perpetuating their voluminous associations was a challenge. Barbara wanted to include both cultures represented in her audience so that all could appreciate the authenticity of her making. Common motifs may become cliché, producing only numbness, without the slightest gap for artists to squeeze through the tangled nexus of connotations. Because her subject lacked the vitality to draw upon the audience's sense of curiosity, Barbara had to improvise with both her fabrication and her visual percolation of prescribed meaning.

For her American classmates, she tried drawing parallels from the lyrics and images of a few common childhood memories—the popular association of the moon with werewolves in the horror movie genre. For her Chinese audience, even though similar denominators of reference can readily draw out strong affections, Barbara took a different position by creating dissimilarity in such feelings during their encounters with her work. Her necklace aimed at displacing whatever sentimentality the moon and flowers might stimulate. Although it is difficult to judge the success of her strategy, her courage in drawing artistic inspiration from clichés and her presentation of complicated concepts were commendable.

Another focus of contextualism draws on the parallel between the ability of members of a language community to “read” a language and the ability of the art community to understand aesthetic objects (Steward, 1997). Just as language is a code for ideas to be communicated, the assumption is that art exists in a similar symbol system in which artistic ideas are understood. One contemporary Chinese artist who managed great success with this aesthetic stance is Xu Bing. For his *A Book from the Sky* in the late 1980s, he created pseudo-Chinese characters, carved them on massive woodblocks and printed them on long scrolls filling grand halls as a spectacular installation piece to persuade viewers of varied cultural backgrounds to believe that the encyclopedia-length text held profound meaning. The fabricated characters were meaningless and “unreadable cultural symbols [that] may shock audiences who can read Chinese and invoke terror caused by feeling adrift” (Guo, 2017, p. 186). To make the similar dissimilar is a tactic calculated to offer an artful rebuttal in artmaking. The aesthetic stance challenges conformity and positions uniqueness at the core of pursuit; in this aspect, it can awaken one's identity quest.

How the Creative Fabrication Transformed Intercultural Sensibilities

Expectations of students enrolled in education abroad programs to automatically acquire intercultural competency are unrealistic (Lantz & Davies, 2015). A semester-long program combined with a 12-day study tour is only the inception of students' life-long journeys to enter global citizenship. Critical reflections from participants involved in this project that are

culturally sensitive were hard to come by. One stated:

Both *jiaozi* and *pierogis* can be found in the frozen food aisle of any local supermarket. Both [kinds of dumplings] come preprepared, microwavable, ready to eat in minutes. We no longer have to spend the hours it can take creating each dumpling individually. All we have to do is buy them frozen, heat them and eat them. The commercialization of these cultural foods exploits the rituals and traditions associated with the foods. (personal communication, February 27, 2014)

Nonetheless this *Get-in-Touch* project bears the potential to become a concrete testimony of the transformation of individuals along their journey to life-long learning. Besides solidifying student travelers' understanding of foreign cultural landscapes by way of more authentic engagement with local arts and cultural activities, it can be an effective impetus to lay a foundation for common ground and engender cultural and self-humility. Aesthetic inquiry of visual symbols and metaphors from any unfamiliar foreign cultural system opened up opportunities to engender a familiar sense and similar sensibilities from back home.

The difficult process of enculturation began when travelers could approach what's dissimilar and unfamiliar in a foreign culture with a curious, genuine, and sincere posture. Adopting the mimetic or the formalistic stance to guide creative fabrications enhanced this attitude and reinforced the formation of positive camaraderie. Initial exchanges of ideas and concepts often felt like navigating uncharted water to begin with. While exchanging ideas with their counterparts, each team was mandated somewhat to expand informational learning of what they knew into transformational learning of how they knew (Kegan, 2009) to internalize positive attributes of each other's culture. The shared purpose also guided the eventual development of a mindset more apt to accept and manage inevitable changes with openness instead of fixation on that which is familiar and similar. Moreover, these two aesthetic stances may be more readily integrated into the curricula of the host institutions.

By contrast, introducing the contextualist stance in this educational framework raised more challenges. Its confrontational avant-garde approach to problematize social issues might sometimes be regarded as highly controversial. Although both guest and host students who were art majors had taken courses in studio and art history, neither had been exposed to the entire range of aesthetic stances in a systematic way. As a result, the junior art students from both cultures who were not attuned to contemporary art theories underlying such stance had great difficulty comprehending what was going on.

Conceptual remedies through verbal explanation became critical but ultimately limited by the short duration of the travel-study. In addition, the social issue highlighted may not be widely known, and that even eminent artists in both cultures may have restricted channels to convey

their message. All these obstacles could impede exchanges of ideas and hinder communications among students. In fact, they may work against the cultivation of cultural humility because the assertiveness could be viewed as judgmental and aggressive by the host when reciprocal reactions were too eagerly sought.

Finally, completing 3D creative works notably required more frequent communication to carefully check and refine details from multiple vantage points. The obvious result was a less disappointing output compared with 2D collages, which can be compiled from easily available images swiftly seized from the Internet at the 11th hour. Participants who tackled this project demonstrated sharpened intercultural sensitivity during and after the trip. One reflected:

Be in shape, ready for a rigorous schedule. Go with an open mind and curious spirit, and you will see [your peers] with new-found admiration, even awe at what the creative fire does when it burns within and is shared without. (personal communication, May 10, 2012)

Experiencing Collective Cultural Humility

The formation of learning communities by students from both cultures to solve the problems of artistic representation promises another workable strategy to deepen intercultural sensibilities. With Chinese students more accustomed to being “taught what to think and how to think” (Shambaugh, 2016, p. 86), working alongside imaginative and presentation-savvy American students—who often zealously talked about their ideas but took no follow-up action—resulted in a gratifying, unexpected result: peer pressure. On multiple occasions when all the students had to present their collaborative work and creative research, results were humbling lessons for all.

From the pre-travel videoconferences to the face-to-face meeting in China to the post-travel exhibition, participants witnessed one another’s struggles and transformation along a narrow passage of learning. The embodied experience of making could also build alliances to resist the status quo. Cultivating flexibility and fluidity by blurring boundaries and enhancing interrelatedness can help young people envision greater possibilities, not to mention that such a mindset can likely incubate creative and innovative thoughts, something deemed critically missing in the Chinese cultural system for decades (Lee, 2013).

These ad-hoc learning communities can also complement the standard studio art curricula and pedagogical practices of the educational institutions involved. In one of the Chinese host universities, Marxist aesthetics was the only prescribed theory systematically introduced to the entire cohort of art and design students in a weekly lecture for the whole academic year. By contrast all the guest students, even the art majors, had taken no formal courses on

aesthetics. They were susceptible to whatever they could easily Google (perhaps why Internet speed and WiFi accessibility figured prominently in their complaints); survey answers also showed their taste most attuned to what they incorrectly referred to as modern art, which was essentially vibrant street art at Zone 798 in Beijing, including both public sculptures and graffiti.

Cultural immersion and language exchange programs are advantageous in developing cultural humility and transforming students as well as empowering them to recognize themselves as global citizens (Luciano, 2020). Nevertheless, transforming students' mindsets and helping them achieve a global outlook on social issues are long and complex educational processes. Advocacy from multiple educational stakeholders and ongoing support from back home are equally needed to embrace diversity and celebrate multiplicity locally. Strengthening connectivity between institutions and educational stakeholders by formulating partnerships is, therefore, a sustainable practice in global education. As such, travel–study exemplifies a win–win scenario to solidify educational partnerships across national borders at multiple levels.

Coda

“但愿人長久，千里共蟬娟。” [*DanYuanRenChangJiu, QianLiGongChanJuan*].

Although a direct translation is impossible, these two lines in Su Shi's poem vividly capture the sense of longing for companionship when gazing at the moon, igniting hope for reunion among those thousands of miles apart. Thanks to the poet from Song dynasty who lived around 1000 CE, whenever his familiar poem is recited, the Chinese diaspora can instantly share the intense feelings resulting from separation and distance. In a contemporary example, the universality of such affection for the moon engendered beneath the expansive sky and the sense of optimism spawned by the lunar phenomenon resonate in the lyrics of “Somewhere Out There” (Horner et al., 1986), the theme song of *An American Tail*, the popular animated feature about a family of mice emigrating from Russia across the Atlantic Ocean in search of the American dream.

Regrettably, easily accessible worldwide communication technology today—for instance, ubiquitous video streaming 24/7—may have significantly reduced such yearning. Constant interactions through high-tech connectivity may have caused the disappearance of certain intimate and invaluable qualities of students' global education experience (Matthews & Landorf, 2015). I humbly assert that this manuscript demonstrates otherwise: The axioms in aesthetics, stories, and “make-special” meanings (Dissanayake, 1991) through creative fabrication and travel–study can still strengthen bonding and relationships across time and space.

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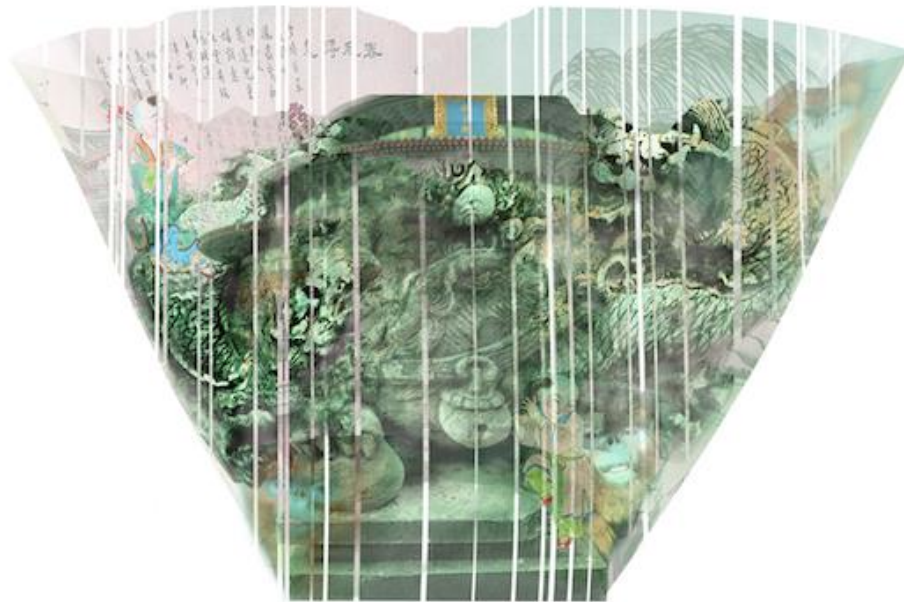
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Koon-Hwee Kan is an Associate Professor of Art Education at Kent State University. Her research interests include intercultural, distance, and continuing education through interactive technology and art teacher education as well as qualitative methodology, especially visual narrative inquiry. Koon's interest in using visuals to tell stories began with her dissertation research entitled, *A Story Told Visually: The Singapore Secondary School Art Style*.

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