Talking to the Middle Kingdom – Teaching Architecture in China

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes some of the issues which arise when delivering a western education programme in China and the problems which may occur when transitioning students from one learning paradigm to another. The specific discipline involved is architecture which is examined from a standpoint informed by Edward Said’s essay ‘Travelling Theory’ first published in 1983 and revised and extended in 2000 in the essay “Travelling Theory Reconsidered”. In his earlier essay Said described “the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another [as] both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity”. He was interested in what happened to ideas when they moved “from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another.” He drew attention to the hegemonic position which western culture occupies in many of these exchanges and identified this as a risk in promoting a genuinely free exchange of ideas and opinions as ‘expertise’ was commodified and used as an oppressive agent of symbolic capital.

“Talking to the Middle Kingdom” explores a western model of architectural education travelling to another culture. It confirms the transformational nature of this movement and identifies some of the problems of communication and perception which arise in the process.
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INTRODUCTION

This paper builds on a previous paper, presented at the ConnectEd Conference in Sydney in 2010 (van Raat, 2010), which proposed that teaching in an architectural design studio is invariably based on particular cultural paradigms. While it was conceded that ‘these may often be suppressed in terms of the styles of architecture to which students are exposed or may be minimised in the social, technical or environmental content of the programmes inherent in the building types students learn’ (van Raat), it was asserted that the method of teaching is nevertheless likely to be based on models that are founded on cultural understandings. It was further suggested that there is a fundamental difference between western (if one can for argument’s sake collapse the whole of the western world into one paradigm) and typical Chinese models of design studio teaching, with the former being more diverse and responsive to a range of criteria while the latter, except in a relatively small number of elite universities, are more prescriptive and focussed on the requirements and understandings of an educational bureaucracy. The western model is claimed to display the benefits of an exploratory mode of investigation which at least claims “to try and develop individual insights and which allows and sometimes requires considerable latitude of students in their investigations and in their outputs” (van Raat).

The paper then went on to describe how a particular strand of teaching practice, currently being operated in China by New Zealand academics, has developed in response to the theories of psychologist Gregory Bateson on how students model their experiences of the world and how creativity can be enhanced by provoking them to develop new models of thinking. It explained how conventional western studio projects were “prefaced by projects specifically intended to destabilize the Chinese students’ pre-existing understandings and to replace them with a conviction that architecture is unpredictable and open-ended. The principle behind such exercises is that a measure of uncertainty can be psychologically positive, and indeed liberating”.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teachers can work with students so that they learn how to do things: to learn what the teacher knows. This behaviour is useful in enabling the students to acquire competence in some of the things the teacher can do. In other situations teachers theorize situations: they may tell you what they or others believe but they don’t tell you how to do anything. Another and sometimes more powerful technique is described by psychologists as modelling, where students are encouraged to be like the teacher in some way or other (Stevens, 1995). It is argued that this technique is common in studio design, and particularly in the critique which is the culminating aspect of design projects. In these cases there is little interest in what might be the ‘real’ nature of things, or in what might be ‘true’.

Psychologists explain this situation as follows: “Human beings live in a “real world”. We do not, however, operate directly or immediately upon that world, but rather we operate within that world using a map or series of maps of that world to guide our behaviour within it. These maps or representational systems, necessarily differ from the territory that they model... When people….experience… dissatisfaction, the limitations which they experience are, typically, in their representation of the world…. ” (Grindler & Bandler, 1976).
It is therefore the representation that must be adjusted, and expanded, before the way a student operates within the world of architecture can be transformed.

For the western academic working in China this process is essential because the ‘map’ of architecture which is transmitted in mainstream Chinese education system appears ‘real’ because it is pragmatic: it deals with conventional technologies and with forms already found in contemporary local architecture. Most importantly it confirms the status quo of: the training, beliefs and experiences of most of the senior staff delivering it; architecture as understood by the Chinese educational bureaucracy which regulates it, and the society which consumes the architecture and within which it is expressed. For students to operate effectively in an international context however, which is a stated or implicit aim of the joint programmes, their view needs to be changed to one that is more open, providing new choices in an unpredictable future. That process of change may usefully start with a period of disconnection which destabilises previously-held beliefs leaving a clear field for new maps to be formed.

THE PROJECTS

When the Joint Courses in architecture delivered by Unitec Institute of Technology from Auckland into universities in Nanchang, Jinan and Shenyang in China first started the projects offered were lifted wholesale from the NZ programme. While this approach did start to acclimatise students to the western curriculum it was found that students took some time to adjust and did not readily develop their understandings of what New Zealand teachers expected from them. The programme was therefore adjusted to provide for short projects offered a year earlier, in the students’ second year of study, in order to introduce them as early as possible to the idea that architectural design was a lateral process which might usefully have unpredictable outcomes: that anything was possible. This was in deliberate contrast to the situation observed by Fung, and confirmed by the author of this paper, that “Chinese architects and teachers (have) mistakenly (adopted) an image (of) knowledge as a ‘massive tome’ in which topics are distributed into static categories” (Grindler & Bandler).

The first such introductory studios are on Piranesi and Calvino and they are short – four days in all. Although offered to students in their second year, these students are still beginners at design since these Chinese universities do not introduce design studio in year one. The students will have had some exposure to the local educational system, however, and a process will have started which Hannah Arendt describes as leading to: “The sameness prevailing in a society resting on labour and consumption (which is) expressed in its conformity…” (Arendt, 1998).

Students are first given a short lecture on either the 17th century Italian engraver Giovanni Battista Piranesi or on the 20th century Italian author Italo Calvino. They are shown examples of Piranesi’s drawings concluding with a series of images from the Carceri (prison) series or, in the case of Calvino, some of the very short chapters from his book Invisible Cities (Calvino, 1974). At the outset students have no idea what they’ll be doing or what the purpose of this, their first contact with western education, will be. Both Piranesi and Calvino are invariably new to them all.

The students are then asked to form themselves into pairs, once again without explanation. Each pair is asked to designate one member as a “P person” and one as an “S person”. Again there is no explanation of what these terms mean and requests for explanation are good humouredly declined. By this stage the students are puzzled but engaged by this process which appears to them like a game and quite unlike their previous experiences of learning about architecture. But the real
pedagogical purpose is destabilisation, the attempt to create a *tabula rasa* devoid of familiar signposts: to start engaging with architecture from scratch.

Copies at A2 or A3 size of the drawings from Piranesi’s *Carceri* series or copies of Calvino’s descriptions of imaginary cities are then distributed, one to each pair. They are given two days to complete orthogonal drawings of the plan (by the “P” person) and the section (by the “S” person), with both sets of drawings corresponding. This exercise is invariably entered into with enthusiasm. After two days the projects are reviewed before the whole class. A supplementary brief is then delivered to the students. They have the two remaining days to redraw their work but now have to populate their drawings in accordance with a programme of their choice so that the imaginary buildings which Piranesi etched, or the imaginary cities which Calvino described in words, are transformed into hotels, fun fairs, warehouses, libraries and museums. At the end of this period the projects are again reviewed and a general discussion on the class work and on individual projects concludes the exercise. It appears to the New Zealand staff that the students have acquired a much higher level of energy in approaching their work than is normal in the local projects. They now know that their own ideas can creatively inform a project and that conceptualisation necessarily, and delightfully, precedes resolution. Feedback from students is uniformly positive. From the local staff it is more muted, perhaps because it constitutes such a departure from the projects that they are used to and perhaps because it looks too much like a game. It may be also that staff find it harder to abandon the typical local model than their students do.

This guardedness by the Chinese staff is significant. Given that the project challenges their current practice and, on another level, their standing as teachers, this is not surprising. Younger staff and staff who have gained part of their own education overseas are more positive than older ones. Again it is not surprising that more flexibility is found in young academics, who have made a smaller investment in a model which appears to the students less engaging than the new one to which they have just been exposed by the ‘foreign experts’.

**RE-APPRaisal**

The educational projects outlined above, and the propositions which generated them, have now been operating for several years. While superficially successful the unease noted in the local Chinese staff has led to a sense that the projects need to be re-appraised in accordance with wider objectives than just the architectural concerns common in western education. Specifically there appears to be a need to address in more depth issues of the cultural context in which these joint programmes operate and to determine how best to develop a form of communication with Chinese staff which will engage them and will activate their energies and skills. This exercise also provides an opportunity to review the communicative techniques used both with the Chinese staff and with the students to see whether these are as effective as possible. In summary, to recognise that when architectural education travels from its source to a different place it inescapably becomes different, and the differences need to be assessed in order to determine whether they are properly meeting the needs of the students and the societies in which they now operate.

The theoretical tool employed to open-up this situation is provided by Edward Said in his 1983 essay *Travelling Theory* (Said, 1991) and the subsequent re-consideration of the propositions contained in it which he provided in a second essay, *Travelling Theory Reconsidered* (Said, 1994) in 1994. In his first essay Said described “the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another [as] both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity” (Said, 1991). He was interested in what happened to ideas when they moved “from person to person, from
situation to situation, from one period to another.” (Said, 1991). He drew attention to the hegemonic position which western culture occupies in many of these exchanges and identified this as a risk in promoting a genuinely free exchange of ideas and opinions as ‘expertise’ was commodified and used as an oppressive agent of symbolic capital. The second essay expands the proposals in the earlier work and emphasises the revolutionary character of not only the original formulation but also of its subsequent transformations in new contexts.

New Zealand staff are aware of the privileged position which academics and intellectuals from the west occupy in the global production and dissemination of ideas. This is emphasised in China where they occupy the status of ‘foreign experts’. As Said has pointed out, citing Foucault, the production of knowledge and the application of power (cultural as well as economic) are linked: “…for power to work it must be able to manage, control and even create detail: (breeding) … a more finely controlled knowledge.” (Said, 1991). Issues of hierarchy, power and control therefore arise in sending western staff to a Chinese university and these may result in a certain blindness to complex (or perhaps not so complex) issues of learning in the programme.

These issues have been well-explored in other disciplines, not least in the delivery of English language programmes. Larsen-Freeman, speaking of communicative language teaching, observes that “while perceived as progressive and modern in some parts of the world, it is not seen as an appropriate way to teach languages everywhere, since many of its underlying values conflict with those of other cultures.” (Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Similarly Pennycook (Pennycook, 1998) consistently argues against the cultural imperialist stance of some aspects of language teaching and notes how many western teachers abroad uncritically assume the superiority both of their own methods and of their own culture. He also notes the resentment that may be felt by local teachers against the ‘foreign experts’. Equally Halliday writes of learner-centeredness that it “carries with it a set of perhaps naive ideas which belong to the BANA (British, Australian, North American) professional-academic culture” (Halliday, 1994) to which New Zealand belongs.

Identifying the local condition requires an understanding of how architectural education is delivered in China. Learner-centredness, a practice viewed favourably in many western countries, is not a characteristic commonly found. Even Chinese teachers have reported to their New Zealand colleagues that the main objective of their students is to discover what the teacher wants and then to deliver it to them. This concentration on authority carries over into the structure of the programme. It is not only educational priorities which are set by the Education Ministry but also in some cases specific projects. As one reports “it’s like a rule which has never been changed…. Neither the staff nor the students have any choice.” (van Raat, personal communication, 2012). So in their first experience of design in a conventional Chinese university students may all be doing the same project – a teahouse, perhaps - and the project might be identical to what has been offered in previous years. This attitude, of dusting-off projects for repeat delivery, is unusual in the west. In China staff report that projects “don’t have anything to do with the local community…we (have) many chances to do this but the running of such… projects are always decided by the (departmental) principal… and he doesn’t have…interest to put such projects for the students and only chases (sic) for the speed of design and construction (of the projects).” (van Raat, personal communication). The frustrations of such an inflexible system are inevitably felt by many of the junior staff.

Equally different is the measure of project complexity. In China the physical size of projects is taken as the primary measure of their complexity. Thus junior students may start with project like a tea-house and end up in a large urban design at a scale of many city blocks. In the west projects
may indeed become progressively bigger but complexity will also be measured by the theoretical
depth involved, the numbers of constraints in the project, the social and/or cultural difficulties it
contains or the level of detailed resolution required. Complexity can be differently assessed.

Educational practice is China differs from that found in the west in other ways as well. Our
observation and the accounts of local staff reveal that student cohorts are generally isolated from
those above or below them. The practice of running vertically streamed projects including students
from several years appears to be unknown, as is the very common practice in New Zealand of
providing a choice both of projects and teachers to students. There are few open critiques and
grading is done by staff without students present. Western teachers see this as a closed, circular
system in which the student is unlikely to ever learn more than the teacher knows – a burden few
western teachers would either think correct or care to carry.

In a model characterised by these attributes the more conservative of the Chinese staff, in informal
conversation, say that the western projects appear trivial (because often small), indulgent (because
different and varied) and randomised (because many possible ‘correct’ answers are solicited). Such
a model is seen as reducing the authority of the staff and of showing insufficient attention to the
legitimate expectations of the students to be instructed in ‘the right’ ways of doing things. Having
moved from the west, where individualism and quirkiness are valued, New Zealand teachers find
themselves operating in a context in which these things are seen as deficiencies. Conversation with
the senior staff of Chinese architecture schools confirms this. During 2011 two different
universities involved in joint courses with a New Zealand partner both raised the issue of the
inappropriateness of the projects offered by the ‘foreign experts’. As the projects themselves had
hardly changed in scope over the previous six years it appears that in the early stages of a co-
operative relationship the Chinese partners accept the western model even if they don’t think it
appropriate. After some time however, they have started to assert the desire and the right to make
changes.

SYNTHESIS
All the conflicting pieces of information set out above need to be considered if the joint programme
is to prosper. Such a synthesis must involve appropriate communication between New Zealand staff
and their Chinese counterparts as well as with the students. More than this, however, it is useful to
be reminded, as Edward Said does in Travelling Theory Reconsidered, that even when theories
travel and become re-formulated, they may still display strengths. A hybrid architectural education
may not be the same as contemporary western practice but may nevertheless have merits.

To start one should note that the cultural paradigms which underlie Chinese education have a
legitimacy in their own context. The authority of the teacher has cultural roots and current practices
also reflect the imperative that has driven Chinese education for three decades: that of getting large
numbers of students into universities. They also reflect the loss of a generation of potential teachers
in the period when the universities were closed during the cultural revolution. This was followed by
a long period when the Chinese education system, in architecture at least, remained effectively
closed to outside influences with few foreign teachers coming to China and relatively few Chinese
staff receiving further education overseas. The government requirement for most if not all
universities to engage with foreign partners shows that this situation has changed and the authorities
now recognise that the next stage in education policy is to increase quality. While much of this may
result from internal changes in the educational environment there is little doubt that the acquisition
and testing of overseas models is also seen as an important part of the process of improvement. But
westerners should not complacently assume that this is a one-way traffic of ideas. As an example it is commonly believed, although seldom directly stated, that architectural education sets out to acculturate students as much as it does to transmit knowledge and skills (Stevens). Such a belief, based on direct personal experience, forms an expectation which western architectural teachers travel with when they come to China. And it is a dangerous one, for its appropriateness, questionable as an educational strategy even in the west, is untested in China. Moreover the concept of a different cultural paradigm is itself a loose approximation to what is in reality a complex and varied thing. Cultures are far from homogenous and it is certainly the case that in China, as Holliday states (Holliday), individuals are always members of more than one culture.

Said remarks that it is when societies come into some sort of crisis that cultures change (Said, 1991). Chinese culture is currently entering a particularly dynamic phase of economic expansion and wider global responsibilities which are impacting in many ways on society and may reflect some of the characteristics of crisis. While this may lead to Chinese architectural education becoming more open to change the consequences of China’s growth have an impact on the west as well as at home. It is therefore appropriate to predict that western educational models, at least as practiced in China, will also be required to change. Mutual adaptation removes some of the risks which can arise if ‘foreign experts’ expect too much change by their Chinese partners and are critical when it doesn’t occur. In a society where political control is tightly enforced and every faculty has its Party Secretary there may well be an ingrained resistance if existing educational systems are perceived to be subverted by new models which are established on the premise that authority not only can but must be challenged. Education, like all other human activities, has a distinct political character. Holliday writes: “Where [the] change is too harsh, crisis leads to the closing of ranks among both teachers and students. If the structure they are used to seems at risk, they hang on to their cultural values and resist.” (Holliday). If this is true of teachers and students it is even more true of educational bureaucrats. Writing of the historic curriculum of Confucian China, but with a resonance for the present, Young writes “Any change in the curriculum would have undermined the legitimacy of the power of the administration whose skills therefore had to be defined as ‘absolute’…” (Young, 1971). It is this very challenging of the skills and authority of the establishment which creates resistance to the development of new, hybrid educational models in China. This sense of crisis needs to be avoided if mutually agreed changes can be introduced.

PRACTICE

It is not useful to start an investigation into the problems of transporting architectural education to China by deciding in advance what outcome is desired. It is better continuously to interrogate the situation as it is actually encountered in the classroom to find ways of overcoming perceived or reported problems. For western teachers this may mean abandoning the premises with which they have become familiar as it becomes apparent that they are not directly applicable to the new situation. One of the crucial issues confronted in the joint courses discussed here is the trade-off between active student participation in the learning situation and a more passive model in which students receive instruction. In these situations, highlighted for western teachers by the invariable requirement in their home countries for student initiative in architectural design projects, one strategy is to underpin the freedom which western education expects with the assurance that the teacher remains available to instruct and, as a last resort, to direct student activity. This is especially necessary in the early years of design instruction.

An allied model that both Chinese staff and students are comfortable with is to increase the amount of co-authorship of projects by both New Zealand and Chinese staff. Another option is to accept that New Zealand staff will teach into some of the projects written by Chinese staff in China but
will make their input to the teaching by emphasising those aspects of it which would be important in a western programme. Thus the New Zealand staff will encourage students to explore more abstract theoretical issues relating to the project, to borrow models from other disciplines to develop solutions to it and to explore new and unexpected technologies which might be applied to its resolution. Initial moves in this direction reveal that the Chinese staff express a much higher level of enthusiasm for this kind of balanced co-operation and an enhanced possibility of influencing their curriculum to produce a hybrid which might display some of the most positive characteristics of both models. This reflects the approach which Holliday calls ‘the market place analogy’ in which the parties become involved in a multicultural pedagogic exchange whereby the encounter of differences produces a new form of activity.

CONCLUSIONS

The idea which Edward Said proposed in the 1980s – of a theoretical model becoming transformed in its translation to a new context – appears not only to be accurate when applied to western input to architectural education in China, but also reveals important insights. Perhaps the most important of these is the need to remain reflective in one’s practice: to remember, as Said himself always was, that the purpose of theory is not only to understand the world in which the teacher operates but also to act to transform it. As he wrote, “it is wise to raise the questions of theory and of criticism in ways suitable to the situation in which we find ourselves… [and what can this tell us about theory itself … and what can it suggest about the relationship between theory and criticism, on the one hand, and society and culture on the other?]” (Said, 1991). We might also remember that the traveller, by definition, has not arrived. To travel is to be in a state of movement.
REFERENCES


