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The role of visual culture in shaping Chinese eighth grade students' personal and regional identities in Macao

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Identity formation and the built environment

Our built environments are a form of 'human communication between the past and the present ... [they] represent an irreplaceable record of human culture and achievement enabling people to understand where they came from, to understand themselves better, to appreciate the perspective of others, and to place their own time within the frame of history' (Short, Erickson & Cunliffe, 1999, pp. 38, 40). When people learn about other times, and in particular other places and cultures, they also become aware of and appreciate more their own culture and themselves.

Joanne K. Guilfoil (2004, p. 52) believes that engaging students to visually analyze a property, particularly a local property considered endangered, and moving them beyond factual knowledge attainment to asking controversial questions about history, context, preservation' and related issues on aesthetics, values, ownership, responsibility, maintenance, sustainability etc., can enhance students' in-depth understanding of their lived built environment. It contributes to their formulation of identities.

Understanding the place we live is important. Environment psychologists demonstrate that the physical properties of the built environment can influence human's behavior, experience, emotion and worldviews (Ittelson, et al., 1974). The physical reality of our everyday life is not a neutral space. Rather, it is a socio-cultural production – a network of power relationships complexly layered with values (Kellner, 1995; Massey, 2005; Short, 1996). William Neill (2004) provides us impressive accounts how people struggled in regaining their cultural identities through urban restructuring.

City is also conceived as a work of art (Olsen, 1986). Consider Panofsky's thesis of (1972) visual forms as symbols, architecture itself inherits symbolic functions of both values and identity (Jencks & Baird, 1969). Mere formalist knowledge does not yield concrete understanding of the construction. It requires interpretation, i.e. viewing architecture in the context of its physical and socio-cultural environment (Zukin, 1995). Critical sociologists regard city as text, because the configuration, use, sizes, internal layout, and external design of the physical environment embodies the actual system of communication and how power is wielded (Short, 1996). As a whole, city itself accommodates a multitude of signs each of which, according to Barthes' definitions (1985), comprises three layers of messages, namely: a simple image (mental representation of an object) or a visual pattern with a linguistic message, a denoted message (coded, perceptual message), and a connoted message (cultural or symbolic message). Simple information attainment does not lead to sophisticated understanding of the connoted significance. Barthes (1967) argues that unless the viewer makes sense of, in particular the symbolic meaning of the sign, the visual structure is not a symbol of value for him/her.

Regarding interpretation, scholars caution us that framing is an important political strategy of legitimizing interpretation, narrative (Zukin, 1995), and memory (Phillip, 2004). However, the power of vision rests in a creative critical mind. A text is ‘an empty form open to interpretations’ (Eco, 1979, p. 5), and meaning is negotiated (Freedman, 2003). Umberto Eco (1979) points out that ‘a text can be read in a naïve way and a critical way’ (p.10), ‘a given ideological background can help one to discover or to ignore textual ideological structures’ (p. 22). In other words, it is the kind of lens we employ in viewing text that determines the experience we may obtain from the activity.

Built environment is the site of social semiosis where our identity is defined (Heliskala, 2003); the phenomenal social reality itself as a hidden curriculum tells us what are valued and what are not. The sophisticated visual technology development today allows students to learn more from a wide base of media resources outside school than in a regular art classroom. Educators are increasingly aware of the significance of local literacy and the contextual connection of curriculum to students’ lived visual reality (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). In art education, making sense of one’s place has been an educational and curricular issue for a long time (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Guilfoil & Sandler, 1999; McFee, 1969; McFee & Degge, 1977; Neperud, 1995). Recently recurrent concern of local literacy appears in diverse presentations in national and international art education conferences, e.g., 2nd APAEC, Hong Kong, 2004; InSEA Asian Regional Congress, Beijing, China, 2004; International Symposium on Art Education, Taipei, 2004; and the annual NAEA Conventions since the turn of the century.

The case of Macao

Macao is a Chinese city which had been administered by the Portuguese power for about 130 years before 1999 (it was not a Portuguese colony then). Owing to its unique historical development, the city is characterized by its rich legacy of both Eastern and Western architecture, many of which can be dated back as early as 400 hundreds years ago. For socio-cultural, political and economic concerns, the then Macao Portuguese government passed and strengthened the Heritage Conservation Laws in the 1980s and 1990s, partially for the sake of nostalgic tourism development. Large annual appropriation was allocated for the restoration of historic buildings, in particular the dilapidated but classified sites which covered mainly the Portuguese architecture. Increasing urban refurbishments in Portuguese style and installations of Western public art in the 1990s transformed considerably the city image. Otherwise, the history of distinctive site(s) was effaced to appeal to the exotic or nostalgic desire of the tourist gaze.

A classic example is Macao’s erstwhile ‘red light’ district where specific buildings were reshaped ‘into symbols of identity, housing specialty restaurants with no references to the past’, thus providing a ‘clean, depoliticized, uncontroversial and picturesque space for the creation of and circulation of public memories’ that everyone can share. However, problems arise when narratives of nostalgia come to replace public history entirely (Clayton, 2002, p.71).

The movement of physical restorations with romanticizing references has been further reinforced since the political handover in 1999, when the current government of Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR) launched a dual economic development policy by forging the initiative cultural tourism industry for the sustainability of the existing gambling industry. Local Portuguese/Baroque style architectural heritage is the selling point in all official and commercial media advertisements. More and more old and new urban areas are retouched one way or another with Portuguese cultural elements that bear no reference to the history of the community.

In 2005, the Historic Center of Macao was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site. Yet only five out of the twenty-five historic buildings in Macao's list of World Heritage are Chinese architecture. The event eventually encourages the government's operation of Portuguese-ness, that even on the official portal website (<http://www.gov.mo/egi/Portal/index.jsp>) none of the local Chinese historic architecture is visually portrayed.

Aligned with the forging of European cultural outlook, the Macao SAR government expanded the casino concession in 2002. Significant Las-Vegas-based international casino corporations started to land on this small coastal city in southern China. In less than three years, Sands was inaugurated, numerous casinos in American style were opened. Fisherman's Pier, a conglomeration of Las Vegas and Disneyland entertainment characteristics, attracted thousands of visitors on its first business day last December. Venetian Macau, Wynn Macau, and MGM Macau, the world's most renowned American casino-resort corporations, schedule the inception of their business the latest in 2007-2008.

The direct impact of the drastic immersion of overseas casino-entertainment culture is the palimpsests of the local visual cultural environment. The mushrooming of casinos accompanied with pawnshops close by, the high-voltage programmed neon advertisements on the four external walls of the casinos, similar dazzling designs of the traditional Chinese symbol of pawnshop, and the emission of laser from the top of certain casino buildings, all in all transform Macao into a simulation of Las Vegas, an empire of neon light. However, unlike its North American counterpart, the cost of Macao's burgeoning of casinos is on the plethoric exploitation of public and natural spaces. Moreover, the casinos are built amid apartments and schools. An additional negative effect is the full size casino advertisements featuring sexy showgirls on the outside of the urban public buses.

The problems

Due to the historic consequences of imported school systems (Mainland China, Taiwan, & Hong Kong British models) and textbooks, and the lack of civic education in school, young Chinese in Macao are said to have low awareness of their national citizenship and weak sense of identity with the city (Tse, 1999). Whereas immigrants from Mainland China populated mainly in the northern district of Macao seldom integrate into the main society (Clayton, 2002).

Secondly, the drastic booming of American styled gaming industry and shopping-entertainment soon result in influx of commercial imagery and artifacts which are often

sophisticatedly articulated and complexly laden with ideologies and values. The impact of current visual culture on local young adolescents in the formation of identities is a critical issue.

The research questions

The main research question of the study is: What formal and informal learning about the historical and contemporary visual culture of Macao influences Chinese eighth grade students' personal and regional identities?

The sub-questions are:

1. Do Chinese eighth grade students in Macao demonstrate any understanding and /or attitudes about the cultural significance
 - (a) of local historic buildings, sites and their architectural design?
 - (b) of the increasing number of signs in the physical environment of Macao that convey elements of European and North American culture?
2. Does this knowledge affect their construction of personal and regional identities?
3. Does the art curriculum in selected regions of Macao address the influence of the changing visual symbolic elements in the local built environment?

Major limitations and delimitations

(a) Limitation

Given that this is a short term study that will produce only a snap shot of time, while a longitudinal study would produce useful evidence of the speed of change over time through priori codes and matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Time is a significant limitation for the researcher.

Secondly, art study is generally not offered in grades 9-12 in Macao, and some schools may have barely 40 minutes of art per week in grades 7-8 while others none. This specific condition restricts the choice of the sampling population for the study to eighth grade students only in school with an art curriculum.

(b) Delimitation

Based on the existing environmental reality of Macao, the study will delimit the scope of visual culture for examination to local historic architecture/sites and artifacts, buildings and signs in the changing physical environment that convey elements of European and North American culture.

The main consideration for the selection of the studied schools is the school location which should be in the immediate vicinity of the city's historic buildings. However, schools situated close to both historic/tourism sites and casinos are the top priorities.

Research methodology

The research is basically a qualitative one but will adopt a mixed method approach applying both qualitative and quantitative strategies at various phase of operation

(Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003). Literature of educational research in the past decade illustrates an increasing number of professionals using diverse models of mixed method approach in the procedures of their enquiries (Rocco et al., 2003).

The application in this research is justified by the following rationales:

1. Complementary strength: mixed method approach can provide stronger inferences.
2. It can further substantial understanding of particular sets of concepts in particular context.
3. It allows using qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques in parallel phases of the study, e.g., working visually in data collection (Halford & Knowles, 2005).

Forms of data

There will be textual, verbal, and (informative) visual data collected that constitute:

1. questionnaires: open- and close-ended questions;
2. taped semi-structured group interviews conducted in semi-informal settings;
3. field notes of participant schools' environments;
4. copies of art teachers' curriculum;
5. video/photo documentary of the changing urban visual environment.

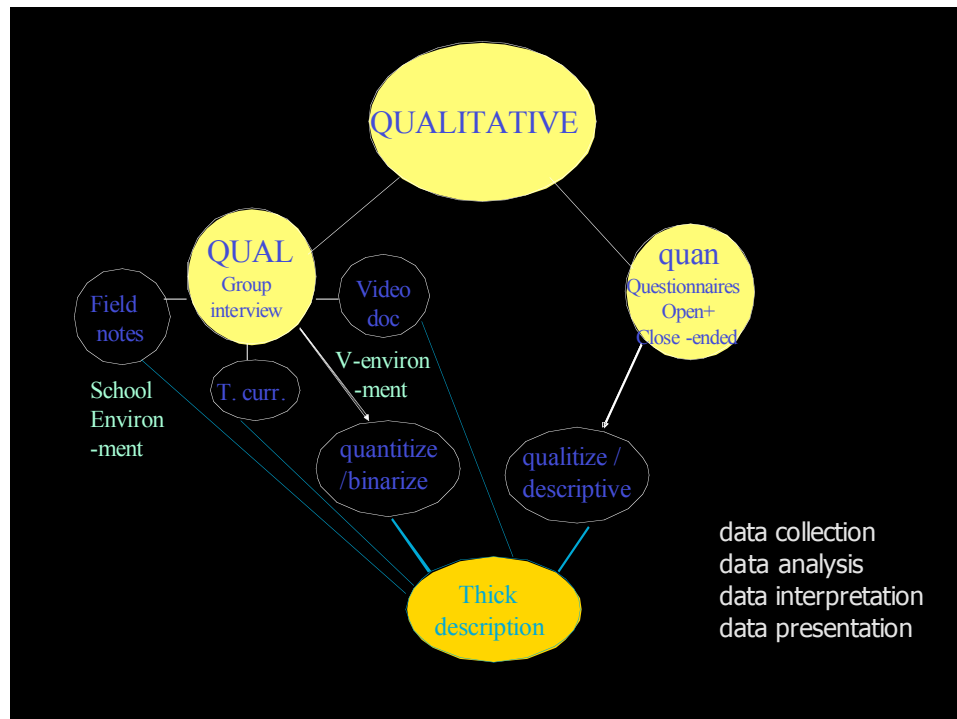


Fig 1: Description of research methodology & procedures

Data analysis references & tools

(a) Qualitative

1. Coding & analyzing verbal data (Chi, M. T. H. 1997).

2. Counting themes(Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Sandelowski, M., 2001; Onwuegbuzie & DaRosa-Voseles, 2001).
3. Categorization (coding)
ATLAS.ti or ETHNOGRAPH5 (Creswell & Maietta, 2002);
SPSS with Text Smart (Bazeley, 2003)

(b) Quantitative

1. Software: ANOVA – employed to determine how groups differ
2. SPSS – descriptive statistics

Expected outcomes

1. Inform educational policymakers in Macao about the importance of art as a core school discipline, the direction of future school art education development and the dimension of art curriculum changes in response to the rapid transformation of the social visual reality and the critical needs of the Chinese adolescent students' identity construction.
2. Provide references for changes in art teacher education in Macao.
3. Generate issues and topics for continuous disciplinary and/ interdisciplinary investigations.
4. Serve as an initiative for research into a similar cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong where Hong Kong Disneyland was inaugurated in September, 2005.

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