

ASIAN CONVERSATIONS

Why UK universities have designs on China

The surging numbers of Chinese design students in UK universities could be dented by restrictions on post-degree stay and the inevitable rise of design schools in China.

By CAITLIN RANDALL London, April 2017

THE artistic vision of young designers in China is wild, maybe even more than here,” says Zhe Wang, the co-founder of Knit Planet, a children’s clothing company based in London. Sipping mint tea in a trendy boutique hotel, Wang, who now calls himself Micky, is one of a growing number of Chinese artists and designers who have studied in the UK with an eye firmly fixed on the promise of their home country’s burgeoning creative industry. “The question is will our creative ambitions be accepted and adapted to the culture there?” he asks.



UK exhibitors gear up for an education exhibition in Shanghai

The number of Chinese students pursuing a degree in art and design the UK continues to surge, climbing steadily since 2000 with the numbers studying creative arts jumping more than 150% between 1999 and 2014, and rising another 16% in 2015. China sent a total of 91,215 students to the UK in 2015-2016, according to the UK Council for International Student Affairs, far exceeding any other nationality. It remains the only country showing a significant increase in student numbers coming to the UK.



Caitlin Randall

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This comes as the British government is scrambling to negotiate a contentious divorce from Europe. Universities here say they expect a sharp drop in applications from European Union, already stagnant or declining, with EU students facing significantly higher international tuition fees than their UK counterparts (as much as double “home” fees of around £9,000).

In a move to offset the decline, UK universities are expanding their recruitment drives in China, recognizing that the number of Chinese students choosing to study in abroad is still on the upswing. This is particularly true in art and design universities where government budget cuts have hit hard. At the same time, China’s commitment to building its creative industries has fostered interest there in pursuing world-class design degrees.

For Wang, It was an inauspicious start. Arriving at Heathrow airport from Beijing on September 11, 2001, the then 19-year-old endured culture shock from his first day in London. “I had no idea what had happened in the US. I couldn’t understand why my cab driver was so emotional. Was this normal here?” Wang says, adjusting his heavy black spectacles, emblematic of hipster London. He stayed to finish a foundation course at Chelsea College of Art, a BA degree from London College of Fashion and an MA from Central Saint Martins.

When Wang talks about changes in China’s design industry, he puts it in artistic terms: “China was like a piece of blank paper, where everyone knew the boundaries. Today there are sketched outlines all over the paper. You still can’t tell what they are...but gradually, the links are coming together,

the outline is filling in.” A metaphor for his home country’s growing creative network.

For now, his own plans are to develop the unfolding online business he runs with his wife, who holds an MA in marketing from the University of London. He is, however, eager to return to his roots. “The end goal is to bring the business back to China,” he says, recognizing his country’s heightened interest in supporting creative industries.

Philip Dodd, Chairman of Made in China, a London-based company that advises city governments on how to attract creative industries, offers a pragmatic view of China’s newfound zeal to promote artistic endeavours.

“For China to move up the value chain as an economy, it needs to become a creative powerhouse,” he says, noting that there is now a realization within the governing Party that China’s creative output lags well behind its manufacturing success.

The government’s commitment to arts and creativity - targeting the creative sector for investment in its last two five-year plans, its blueprint for economic development - has helped nurture student interest in art and design, Dodd says. But mostly, he adds, it’s the private sector “that moves faster and is more nimble” that has spurred an enormous leap in “creative energy and business.” He cites examples such as 798 Art District in Beijing - a decommissioned military factory area that houses a thriving artistic community - and the animation business in Guangzhou.

On a grey London afternoon, skylights flood the studio with an unexpected burst of sunshine. It goes unnoticed by students here. They are hard at work among scraps of fabric, half-dressed mannequins and discarded designs, creating a collection for their final fashion show at Central Saint Martins (CSM). The college, listed as the world’s top fashion design school in The Business of Fashion’s highly-regarded global rankings, is one of six art colleges under the University of the Arts London (UAL) umbrella. UAL, which includes CSM, Chelsea College of Art and Design, the London College of Fashion, Camberwell College of Arts Wimbledon College of Arts and the London College of Communication, is a favoured destination for internationals who make up 39 percent of its student body, according to the Complete College Guide. UAL saw a 100% increase in the number of Chinese students attending between 1999 and 2014 and student numbers from China continue to grow.

At CSM, the BA in Fashion design draws 40 percent non-EU students with its biggest intake from China, according to the college. Last year, applications from China for undergraduate study rose by eight percent while MA applications rose a hefty 46 percent. Anne Smith, Dean of Academic Programmes at CSM, attributes the sharp growth in MA applicants to both the growing awareness and ambition of designers in China and to the upsurge of students returning to China from Britain, in particular CSM. Government funding cuts in recent years have pummeled British art colleges, with more than £50 million reportedly axed from UAL’s coffers. The university has had to move quickly and creatively to secure its financial future. Among other things, they have stepped up recruiting efforts China, and set up courses there to attract potential applicants.

“We are offering short-courses in China and seminars in various 6th-form colleges in Hong Kong and mainland China and we’re looking to build on that,” says Smith, a CSM graduate in fashion design who travels to China on average two to three times a year.

In Beijing and Guangzhou, CSM also runs a short version of its art foundation course, allowing students to continue the year in London before applying to the BA program. The college staffs recruitment offices in Beijing, Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

China is eager to improve arts education, opening numerous design schools in universities with more planned. A number of top-tier universities, including Hong Kong Polytechnic’s School of Design and Beijing Institute of Fashion, offer wide-ranging programmes. But Smith at CSM still sees an important role for a British design education.

“It’s about approach,” she says, sitting in a small conference room in the college’s still-new home, a revamped grain depot originally built in the 1800s. Most of staff at CSM is part-time and work in the industry as well, keeping lecturers fully connected to the fast-changing fashion world, according to Smith.

“In the traditional Chinese curriculum it’s difficult for students to immerse themselves in design,” Smith says, noting that CSM fashion students spend one day on week on contextual and critical studies and four days on design projects.

“Learning here is very much about developing a student’s personal sense of identity and design signature,” she adds. “In developing that signature, working on projects, they have to learn the technical aspects of design.”

For Dan Ni Wu, 22, a third-year student at the London College of Fashion, whether it’s learning to pattern cut or design, there are “no limits here.” For a young designer from Shenzhen in Guangdong Province, she says that came as an extraordinary surprise.

“They don’t set boundaries,” Wu says. Slender and delicate, her hefty men’s shoes and stripped knee-socks add a kooky appeal to her student enthusiasm. “Tutors here try to help you take your work from your imagination to

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Pulling up a batch of images on her iPhone, Wu excitedly describes her latest project: a pinstripe suit dress, “feminized” with a silk camisole and gold lame panelling.

“Art can’t be controlled,” she says. “In China, the focus is on the technical side of design without much thought about artist expressing their own personal experience. I learned who am as a designer in London.” Unlike many Chinese parents who guide their children towards more conventional careers, Wu says hers were open to the idea. In her final year at LCF, Wu has applied for MA programmes in London and hopes to stay on after graduate school to work for a major European label.

Masha Ma, 32, followed a path Wu would envy. At 16, Ma came to London for a foundation course at CSM and spent the next seven years there doing BA and MA degrees and worked as an intern to her fashion idol Alexander McQueen. After graduation Ma started her label, launching her debut collection in Paris to rave reviews. In 2013, Ma returned to China where she set up a design studio with a staff of around 50.

“London taught me that chaos is vital,” she told the Guardian in a 2015 interview in Beijing. “The quest to find the essence of modern China concerns every creative person here,” adding that the country’s state of transition chance “to write history every day.”

But today’s design students hoping to emulate a career path carved out by previous graduates from UK universities are facing a different political climate. In 2013, the British government brought in new immigration legislation that makes it harder for international students to stay on after graduation. The new rules add “genuineness” interviews to the existing point-based hurdles students already have to clear if they aim to stay on in the UK after their degree course ends.

At the time, leading figures in London’s design institutions were incensed, among them Nigel Coates, professor emeritus at the Royal College of Art.

“It would be a disaster for London,” Coates told *Dezeen Magazine*. “For creative people, London is the most attractive city in the world, partly because of its schools. But the government, confused as always, seems to be shooting itself – and us – in the foot.”

There have also been recent reports that the government is debating cutting international student numbers by nearly half in a move to meet Prime Minister Theresa May’s immigration targets. International students in Britain are treated statistically as though they were immigrants; a policy that many argue diminishes the UK’s ability to attract the best, brightest and most talented students and harms what is often called the country’s soft power.

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“We’re an art school not a business,” read a sign held up by a student protester at CSM last year, when activists occupied the college to protest proposed cuts to foundation courses across UAL. Andrew Marr, a BBC reporter and presenter, hosting a special edition of Radio 4’s Start the Week, put it differently:

“To invest in art and design means putting public money into areas whose value cannot be captured on a spreadsheet....That means faith. It means risk.”

“Other countries understand this, including China where more than a thousand art and design colleges are operating and whose students greatly benefit from colleges here too.”

In the next two years, as Prime Minister May’s government grapples to settle the details of its EU break-up and hammer out a trade deal, art and design schools here will be scrambling to ensure their future. Dodd at Made In China describes it as a race on two fronts for UK colleges: locking in their own financial viability and doing so before a number of Chinese art colleges emerge as world beating design schools.

“Over the next 15 years, Chinese art colleges will get their act together and [this] could very well be a crisis for UK schools,” he says.

Middlesex University in North London could hardly be thrown in among the specialist art colleges that dot the capital and beyond. But its origins date back 140 years to the renowned Hornsey Art College and the University still boasts a flourishing School of Art and Design. But it’s in the Media and Performing Arts Department, in collaboration with the Confederation of British Industry, that an innovative partnering programme is pushing new links to China.

Over the last several years, Professor of Dance Chris Bannerman has been instrumental in creating and organising ArtsCross, a dance project bringing together students, academics and artists from Middlesex and Beijing Dance Academy (BDA). It is, he says, as much a dance project as a diplomatic mission and an exciting way to push through academic barriers.

Recruiting dancers for the Middlesex performing arts programme has “slowly and organically” grew out of working with the BDA, he says. There are currently three BDA undergraduates at Middlesex and a PhD candidate coming from Taipei.

But most importantly, Bannerman says the dance project has pushed both British and Chinese dancers and academics to recognize the value in each other’s artistic approach.

“We make the fundamental mistake of assuming that our educational system is right and that we have nothing to learn from theirs,” says Bannerman, who is 68 and still performing.

There were struggles, Bannerman admits, explaining that the Chinese choreographers took “a far more didactic approach” while the westerners were pushing their dancers to respond creatively. “Interestingly, the Chinese were the first to notice the difference and incorporate our ideas. For them it’s been a modernizing project. For us? Extraordinary in so many ways.”

All signs indicate that the British government is increasingly less committed to supporting the next generation of young artists and designers. If this is the case, new models of cooperation and support are needed. Art and design schools would be wise to include China in the mix and approach the problem as any art student might: thinking creatively.

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