

New trends of research in postgraduate design education in China*

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Abstract: Although postgraduate design education has existed in western countries for several centuries, it is still new in China, including Hong Kong and Macao. In the past, although postgraduate design education has been claimed available in some universities in China, nearly all of them are fine-art or engineering oriented. Only in the past few years, postgraduate design education with significant design research elements has been incorporated in the curricula. This paper briefly reviews the trends and development of design research in postgraduate design education in the western world. It then identifies the limitations and constraints of the postgraduate design education in China. Based on case studies in several universities in China, the paper attempts to identify the opportunities and then new trends of design research in postgraduate design education in China.

Key words: postgraduate study; design education; research trend; China

1. Introduction

Compared to other disciplines, design is a relatively newer discipline. Different from the “higher level of studies” of some traditional disciplines that have existed for more than several hundreds years, postgraduate design education has existed in western countries for the last several decades. In fact, the directions of development of postgraduate design education are quite varied (Goldfarb, 2001). Besides traditional research studies, such as philosophical research (that is Ph.D., D.Phil., M.Phil.), numerous postgraduate programs have appeared in recent years (for example, D.Des, M.Des, M.A., M.Sc.). Apart from some of these programs being quite general and broad in their objectives and requirements, other programs are very focused on particular directions and areas.

For the past two decades, universities in China, including those in Hong Kong and Macao, have offered more postgraduate design programs, or some claimed to be design-related programs (School of Design, 2003; SIU, 2005a, 2009). Many of these programs are offered by design schools and departments directly, while quite a lot of them are offered by fine-art, architecture, arts, humanities and engineering schools and departments. Since the early 2000s, postgraduate design education in China, as in other countries, has claimed a need to have serious review and organized development (SIU, 2009). For example, a meeting was conducted in Beijing in 2001 and later several smaller meetings were conducted in other places in China to consider the development of postgraduate programs as well as new reference materials for the industrial and product design discipline.

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Therefore, now is the time for us to explore how postgraduate design programs can better nurture students to meet the new social, industrial and educational needs. In particular, while more researchers and designers also expect postgraduate design education can bring more knowledge contribution through research, now is a good time to review and identify the opportunities and then trends of design research in postgraduate design education in China (SIU, 2003).

2. Views and trends of postgraduate design education

While better organized formal design education (or called training in some places) did not appear until the early 20th century, when postgraduate design education actually began is quite vague and arguable. In fact, some universities have claimed to include design-related postgraduate studies earlier than last century. For example, many architecture schools claim that their research-based studies (that is, at a higher level than undergraduate programs) that cover creative thinking and design elements appeared much earlier than the formal definition of design education that appeared in the last century.

Nevertheless, to leave such endless and more or less not-very-meaningful arguments, this paper would prefer to see what kinds of postgraduate design programs (or studies) have existed thus far. Among all, the programs provided formally by institutions can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Programs purely based on research requirements;
- (2) Programs mainly based on taught elements;
- (3) Programs mainly based on research requirements and with some taught elements;
- (4) Programs mainly based on taught elements and with some research requirements.

Regarding the programs based on or related to research, many of them are up-to-date and related to philosophical research and analysis (for example, programs called Ph.D., D.Phil. and M.Phil. in most English speaking countries). The major and nearly the only expected output of these programs is a traditional thesis. However, this trend of postgraduate design education has undergone some changes and also received critical comments in recent years. For example, many educators as well as industry practitioners criticize such kind of programs as they keep students in universities—an ivory tower—and the result is that their finally generated theses are only put on bookshelves of libraries for limited people to access. The knowledge discovered or generated by the students cannot bring significant benefits (that is, constructive and apparent changes) to the society. Therefore, some design program developers and researchers have defined “research” as what is related to the narrow meaning of “philosophy”. They have initiated particular meanings of “design research”. For example, some universities in the United States have considered design research that must include a high degree of “applied” research elements. These research elements are not only on philosophical investigation and discussion, but more about experimental exploration and analysis (also see Hickman’s study on art & design education, 2008). Different from the traditional British style with a high degree of autonomy for students to identify their research directions, titles, objectives, and methods of investigation and analysis, some universities in the United States prefer to relate their students’ research with particular projects (that is, most of them are industrial related projects). Students’ research is more or less bounded to specific topics and with specific roles in particular research labs or centers. Outcomes of applied research in postgraduate design programs are highly valued, while in turn theses become a routine stage-report for graduation with less significance compared to the application value of research.

Obviously, it is still too early to state which of the opposing views can and will dominate postgraduate design

education in the future, while some people still prefer to take the middle ground and accept both trends of development. They also take a more inclusive perspective to accept a balanced development of postgraduate design programs in the society.

3. Postgraduate design education in China

3.1 Case studies in China

Case studies related to postgraduate design education in China were conducted from 2003 to 2008 (SIU, 2003, 2005a, 2007). Several universities with postgraduate design programs in mainland China and Hong Kong were selected for focused studies. The major reason for initiating the studies was the change in the university system in mainland China. Many universities, including design institutes, were combined to form larger universities. Some of these design institutes (or renamed as design departments after combining with the universities) have still maintained part of their internal organization structures and also autonomy for setting up programs, though these institutes are under the umbrella of their governing universities. Therefore, some of these design institutes took the chance to review and then reform their programs, including the resource and directions of postgraduate design programs. In addition, while these design institutes are now under the university system instead of the conventional institute system, they have gained more resources to plan and implement postgraduate programs (SIU, 2009).

The studies included reviews of the program documents (for example, program objectives, structures, graduation requirements), and interviews with the program leaders and teaching professors. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way in order to allow the interviewers to prompt questions for more in-depth understanding. Moreover, different design institutes might have different structures and requirements where such kind of semi-structured interview format was more appropriate and effective to invite interviewees to give further comments on the existing design education in China.

3.2 Key issues

As a country claimed to be one of the Four Great Ancient Civilizations and with thousands of years of historical and social development, China has a long history in “education”. From traditional informal parent-child home education to different scales and formats of schools, China has different stages of informal and formal education systems. Compared to traditional arts and humanities disciplines and subjects, design up to the present moment is still new in China, even the definition and objectives of the discipline. The term “design” was still not well discussed in the higher educational field until the mid 1990s. In the past, “design” was only generally considered and categorized as a kind of arts or art (SIU, 2003, 2009). When asking the older generation of professors in the universities as well as design institutes about the value of design, they may agree to its significance. However, when asking what the definition of design is, many of them may not give a clear explanation.

Nevertheless, while design has been more and more highly valued and design has become a more known discipline, its potential for offering postgraduate studies has gotten higher (SIU, 2005b, 2007). More resources have been injected into developing postgraduate design programs. In particular in recent years some of the conventional fine-art disciplines and subjects have been criticized and faded in popularity. Conventional engineering disciplines and subjects have lost part of their attractive characteristics to the young generation. The importance of design as a discipline with a creative nature and higher application value to the society as well as

the industry has become more recognized (LEUNG, 2007). For example, since the mid 1990s, postgraduate research study such as Ph.D. and M.Phil. and taught postgraduate programs such as M.A.(Des.) have become higher valued in Hong Kong (School of Design, 2003, 2008). Since the early 2000s, more taught postgraduate programs such as M.Des. in different areas have also been blossomed. In many cities with highly regarded universities such as Beijing and Shanghai, postgraduate design programs have also become more popular since the early mid 2000s. This has been followed by some professors who have graduated from other countries with a formal education in design research instead of only conventional fine art research, thus reform and new postgraduate design education with more research elements has been urged. In addition, more first-degree graduates expect to stay in universities to further their studies. Such a situation further enhances the development potential of postgraduate design programs.

According to the case studies, several key issues related to recent postgraduate design education in China are identified:

(1) There has not been sufficient review and discussion on postgraduate design education, in particular in mainland China.

(2) There is no commonly agreed or accepted structure of programs, for example, length of study for a commonly recognized degree title in different places.

(3) Elements in programs, even with similar program titles, are quite varied. For example, some of the Master level design programs (that is, duration, contents) in mainland China are different from those in Hong Kong as well as other foreign countries.

(4) Research elements are particular lacking in many programs. In other words, taught elements mostly still dominate in the majority of the programs.

(5) Many design institutes or departments still run their programs as other conventional arts or fine art programs. For example, no specific “design research” knowledge and experience can be provided to students.

(6) Many programs cannot go along with the changes and meet the needs of the society and the industry.

(7) Many programs cannot go along with the educational trends of the whole world. In other words, many programs cannot consider the needs and match with the changes of the programs in other countries.

(8) There is a lack of experienced professors to guide research students, though an increasing number of design graduates return to China to work in universities. For example, many of the professors working in the design institutes and departments only have knowledge and teaching experience in other disciplines, for example, engineering, art, social studies.

(9) Team teaching and supervision is still lacking in most of the postgraduate design programs, in particular the research based programs.

(10) Although increasing numbers of students participate in design projects during their studies, well organized research training is still lacking.

3.3 Opportunities

The development of postgraduate design education in China is still in its infant stage, or we are at least unable to say it has reached a mature stage (SIU, 2009). In fact, this limitation of design education provides opportunities for educators to develop well-thought out directions, goals, objectives and programs. Above all, there are some opportunities for improved program development:

(1) Based on its rich cultural and historical background, China has a wide spread of well-developed disciplines and knowledge which give advantage for the development of design education, including postgraduate

design education.

(2) China has its particular culture and social needs, therefore particular trends of postgraduate design education as well as particular ways of research can be developed.

(3) Due to its diverse cultural, social and environmental characteristics, program development as well as research activities in China are more flexible.

(4) Experience from the foreign—the western world can work as reference for the program development in China.

(5) Development of design education in different regions gives reference to other places to establish particular programs. For example, universities in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai have better experience in design research as well as program organization. All this experience can perform as reference for other places, such as Tianjin, Guangzhou, Macao.

(6) Mainland China has rapidly been opened to the outside world. This situation has allowed the society and universities to have opportunities to contact better with other places. For example, exchange of postgraduate design education experience started in the late 1990s. Such kind of exchange has proved that it brings insight for the program developers in mainland China.

(7) Mainland China attracts foreign investment. Such investment also brings opportunity to the industrial, commercial, social and cultural developments. In turn, these developments also enrich the opportunities for postgraduate research activities. For example, more international companies have established design labs and research centers in the mainland universities. More companies have also been interested in establishing collaboration networks with the universities.

It is foreseen that the following trends of design research in postgraduate design education will come true in the near future:

(1) Collaboration and interaction in research between east and west will be seen.

(2) Varied research directions will blossom.

(3) More degree graduates will stay in universities to continue their postgraduate research studies.

(4) More experienced researchers and designers will return to China and they will directly or indirectly participate or influence the design research in the universities.

(5) More foreign experienced researchers and designers will visit to and stay in China to carry out research and teaching work in the universities. More exchanges will be carried out.

(6) Working with the government, industry, NGOs and communities, more applied research will appear. In other areas, postgraduate research will provide significant support and influence to these parties.

(7) Different specific postgraduate research programs will appear with new structures and contents of programs different from those existing in foreign countries. For example, more integrated programs will appear.

(8) Multidisciplinary research will be urged and promoted. Design disciplines will be more specific, while their boundaries will also become vague (that is, more interactions between/among different disciplines in research).

(9) More inter-institutional and inter-departmental research will appear.

(10) Conventional theses will not be the only research outputs any more. Instead, integrated outputs (or, research indicators) will replace conventional research outputs. For example, combined/integrated theses with other applied research outputs such as designed products and visual images will become the acceptable outputs of postgraduate design study outputs.

(11) Assessment of the quality of postgraduate students' research outputs will not only be the sole role of academia, but will also include more contribution from the external parties outside the universities, for example, the industry.

4. Conclusions

Postgraduate design education in China is still new and not well-organized in terms of implementation and further development. Reviews and reforms have also been weak in that significant improvement for the past decade has not been carried out. All of these do not mean that postgraduate design education will have no hope or freeze at the current state (SIU, 2007, 2009). Instead, due to the external changes and internal needs and aspirations, postgraduate design education in China must have changes.

There are still some critical issues necessary to be concerned with and solved if a high quality of postgraduate design research is expected. One of the critical points for success is how to be able to identify and well-use opportunities for better development of postgraduate design research in China. It is foreseen that China will develop its own postgraduate design research. The quality of research outputs as well as their "impacts" will be judged not only by the conventional way and academia, but more by the whole society.

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