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**How One Art Educator Combines the Strengths from Two
Educational Systems, Chinese and Canadian,
To Develop A Teaching Philosophy**

Jing Ping Tang

A Thesis

in

The Department

Of

Art Education

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art Education at
Concordia University
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ABSTRACT

How One Art Educator Combines the Strengths from Two Educational Systems, Chinese and Canadian, To Develop A Teaching Philosophy

Jing Ping Tang

In this studio-based thesis, “How One Art Educator Combines the Strengths from Two Educational Systems, Chinese and Canadian, To Develop A Teaching Philosophy,” combines several aspects of the author’s studio practices and with her learning experiences as a Chinese student in Canadian fine arts program. This thesis shows the process of how the author improved her art-making abilities and how she developed her teaching philosophy and methods by using the education that she received from ceramics courses at a Canadian university as a link to her education in painting and drawing in China. At the same time, through qualitative research, the author uses her art-making, personal living and learning experiences as a research case in order to explore and gather truly first-hand data. The author shares her own experiences in art education and art-making in China and Canada to help the readers easily understand her theoretical rationale, an approach which is consistent with her belief that theory can result from actual practice.

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CHAPTER 1

Statement

To be a qualified art educator requires a broad scope of theoretical and practical knowledge over the relationships between art and other human endeavours. It also requires familiarity with a variety of the theories and techniques used in making art. Of particular interest to me are the differences between Eastern and Western art and education, as well as the ways in which the strengths of both teaching methods and practices can be incorporated into a more fully-rounded pedagogy. This incorporation would allow me, as an art educator, to give students from various cultures more access to an understanding of the art-making process, so as to allow them the ability to apply art within their daily lives.

Introduction

In this Master's of Arts (M. A.) studio-based thesis, entitled "How One Art Educator Combines the Strengths from Two Educational Systems, Chinese and Canadian, To Develop A Teaching Philosophy," I focus on combining several aspects of my studio practice with learning experiences as a Chinese student at a Canadian university. In doing this, I employ knowledge obtained through studying in a graduate art education program and undergraduate fine arts courses. At the same time, through qualitative research, I use my art-making, personal living, and learning experiences as a research case in order to explore truly first-hand information. In order to show how I came to better understand the role of an art teacher, I plan to elaborate upon

my experiences in both the Eastern and Western educational systems, as well as further explore the two years of research based on my studio practice. This approach will allow me to share the experiences I gained through an education in the fine arts, and the art-making processes I learned about and used in China and Canada. This will help my readers better understand my theoretical rationale, which maintains that truly making art can only result from the application of both theory and practice; it is an ever-changing process of synthesis.

That being said, the primary goal of this thesis is to determine whether blending some positive aspects of the methodologies and philosophies from Eastern and Western art education is an effective way to help me improve my own art-making and teaching abilities. To accomplish this, two art projects of my own creation will be examined: (1) "The River of My Memories," and (2) "Chinese Red." A video documenting the two projects, called "Art Practice," will be also presented in support. These two projects were displayed in an exhibition at Concordia University (in 2001), because I believe that words, combined with demonstrations, is a much more effective method of expression than merely using words alone. Another reason I displayed this work was my belief that education, for an artist, is not simply about looking at or talking about art, but also about creating art. Furthermore, the benefit of using this teaching method is that it is an effective way for students to learn the art-making process by watching hands-on demonstrations and doing hands-on work. This way, they will also absorb the necessary knowledge for educating others in these same techniques. This is an essential step in a complete art education, because

people cannot effectively teach the complicated and technical processes of creating if they lack the experience of making their own art with these skills.

Research method

1. Observation

In order to collect first-hand experience for this research, I took undergraduate ceramics courses in the studio arts program at Concordia University for two years. I also took a ceramics workshop at Centre de Céramique Bonsecours (a college) for six months. In order to document my art-making processes, I also took a private photography course from one of my friends.

2. Personal story telling

The reasons I chose to conduct my research in a ceramics studio was because of a career goal to teach this delicate art form, my childhood dream to become a potter, and my feelings of nostalgia for China (where ceramics connect to my daily life). In addition, as a communicator, I prefer to employ the story-telling method (the so-called narrative approach¹) in writing my thesis, which I believe is the most direct way to reach people. In doing this, I recall my Chinese art education background and describe my recent experience of studying in Canada, in order to identify how both Chinese and Canadian art educational philosophies have affected my art-making. As

¹ I first read this idea expressed by Steve Rolls on Thunder-McGuire in Zurmuehlen's book, Studio Art: Praxis, Symbol, Presence. He states that, "Behind introducing myself, through my stories of riding my bike and getting children to respond by reaching for their own narratives was a history of storytelling as the foundation of art teaching and making" (1990, p. 54).

such, I use aspects from these two different types of teaching, which were beneficial to me as resources, to build on and improve my art teaching methods.

Justification

1. How does my research affect me?

My research in a ceramics studio in Canada allowed me to experience the Canadian art education system first hand. I not only gained knowledge about art education by observing different teaching methods, but I also learned new art-making techniques.

2. How can my research affect art education?

My thesis is therefore a case study that offers suggestions for teaching art, which are based on my bicultural experiences, and focus on combining the positive influences of both Chinese and Canadian art education.

CHAPTER 2

A brief review of the relevant literature

Several issues and questions became important to me while I was studying art in Canada. Most notably, I developed an interest in answering three specific questions. These questions are: (1)“What were the positive influences from my art education in both China and Canada?”; (2)“How can I use these positive influences to improve myself as an effective art educator?”; (3)“Do the answers to these questions necessarily differ depending on the cultural context in which they are asked?” When I looked at these questions, I began to see how my decision to study in Canada provided an avenue for answers from more than one cultural perspective. This encouraged me to do research and gain an understanding of the philosophies behind both the Chinese and Canadian art education systems. To do this, I used comparative literature to address these research goals. I then used this same literature to support my methodological approach--studying the first-hand knowledge that I gained from both countries in the search for a more “well-rounded” approach to making and teaching art.

Experiential bases of art

My research is based on a Chinese theory called “the theory of substance” (*Du-Lun* 篤論), which means theory can result from actual practice. For this reason, I believe one of the most important concepts of art-making is to gain hands-on experience. Zumuehlen supports this idea in her book Studio Art: Praxis, Symbol, Presence (1990), when she writes that art-making for children is, and should be, seen as an

experiential process. She uses ‘praxis,’ ‘symbol’ and ‘presence’ to explain an aesthetic experience which combines doing, seeing and feeling. Through this, the process of ‘making’ draws the thought and expression out of the artist, thereby establishing the ‘symbol’ within the ‘presence’ of the piece. In keeping with these ideas, I use myself as an example to demonstrate these concepts, (which has been illustrated in detail in chapter 4 “Meaning Through Making: A Conceptual Framework”).

Personal philosophy of life—Buddhism and Zen

An artist’s personal philosophy of life is the most important influence on art-making and artwork. For me, this influence is Zen Buddhism. “Zen, in light of its definition, is a form of Buddhism asserting that enlightenment comes from meditation and intuition, with less dependence upon scripture” (The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, 1989, p. 1682). My Buddhist background has allowed me to understand Zen and its relationship to art; specifically, the art of making pottery. This is especially apparent when actually working with clay because I believe that an artist’s hands can feel the physical nature of the clay during the processes of creation, and thus feel its full nature beyond the limited capacity of words. For example, in Zen and the Art of Pottery (1990a), Beittel asserts that the process of making pottery consists of “simple acts,” which require the “right mind, right attitude and right practice”, which lead to achieving the “Zen mood” (p. 10).

Personal philosophy and teaching--Buddhism and Zen

In this thesis, I integrate my philosophy and understanding of Buddhism and Zen into art, through ceramics. I feel that understanding pottery is the same as understanding Zen, which requires a lifetime of dedication. I also believe in the apprenticeship within “a Great Tradition absorbing all of man’s traditions of making vessel forms in clay, from earliest times to the present, East and West” (Beittel, 1990b, p. 9). Here, Beittel is referring to a hands-on technique of making pottery. It is the perpetual process of the teacher passing the necessary knowledge of hand motion to the student so that the student may then become teachers themselves. In pottery, this is literally done by “word” of hand. (Beittel, 1990b, p. 4)

Research as re-search, to search again, to take a closer second look

When I began my research, I was inspired by one of Wilson’s articles, “The second search: Metaphor, dimensions of meaning, and research topics in art education”(1997). In this, Wilson states that research is “*re-search*, to search again, to take a closer second look” (p. 2). Accordingly, I also thought that research could give me the chance to *re-view* the educational influences, which I received as my education in China. This idea led me to review my art education background as *re-search*, to search again, and to analyze this background within my new educational context. I planned to use *re-search* in the sense of drawing upon my own experiences as a student in both Eastern painting and drawing classes and Western ceramics studios. This would improve my ability as an art educator and a student who can now combine the strengths of two educational

systems. Most notably, I could now develop an art teaching philosophy and methodology through the pursuit of stronger and more-rounded teaching techniques.

CHAPTER 3

Personal background: China and Canada

Academic and professional goals

After I graduated from university in China in 1993, I worked for three years as an art editor at an advertising department. I also worked as a part-time teacher with retired employees at a college for the elderly. At this time, I had a very hard time making my own art. I did not have the necessary feelings of inspiration. I no longer felt satisfied with the content of my paintings, because they resembled that of almost every other painter in China. I tried to find my own way, but I failed. At this time, I thought my career in the fine arts would come to an end. In a final attempt, I told myself that I should go back to university to study a Master's degree. This way, I could improve my skills in terms of both theory and practice. I decided to continue my studies in art education, because I want to become a qualified art educator for adults and art teachers.

When I was in China, I noticed, through looking at art books, magazines and other references, that Western artworks appeared different to me from Chinese ones. For example, when I first saw Minimalism, I was very surprised because it was so different from what I was accustomed to. It had real no images and, many times, only had a few colours. This was strange, when looking at this work from a Chinese perspective. Subsequently, I sought to learn about these different artistic styles. At that time, I noticed that there were stylistic differences but could not explain why. I felt that the break between Eastern and Western artworks might be the result of

contrasting art-making concepts and art education methodologies, not just the differences of social system, culture, religion or the economy in general. The desire to learn more about the differences motivated me to study abroad.

Another reason I decided to study art education abroad was that, I knew (through my research), that the art education systems in Western countries do not limit studio access only to specific fine arts students. When I was a student in China, access to studio art courses was limited by the type of degree in which a student is registered for two reasons: (1) the emphasis on the student's major field and (2) the expense. For example, during my undergraduate studies, my major was painting and drawing. Therefore, I could not register in other fine art courses, such as ceramics, fibers, photography, sculpture or printmaking--nor I could afford to.

In 1998, when I came to Canada, I began to look at Western art in museums and art galleries. I noticed the many different media sources that Western artists employ and wondered why it was not like this in China. Compared to my experience of Chinese artists, Western artists seemed to have much more freedom in their art-making. For example, they could choose to use only one medium or they could use several media sources together. Many artists combined such things as ceramics, fibers, sculpture, video, food, and music in order to express themselves. I thought a reason for this might be the open studio programs offered in Canada. I realized that the lack of freedom for experimenting with different media could be a limitation for Chinese artists.

This discovery made me understand that one of my weaknesses as an artist/art teacher was that I had only worked with two-dimensional media, and I lacked knowledge of three-dimensional forms and the media used to create them. I had concentrated on working with two-dimensional techniques, such as drawing and painting, which I studied for more than ten years. I had taught myself to focus on only one area of art-making. Consequently, my lack of “skills” and “techniques” in three-dimensional art-making really bothered me. I decided that I needed to expand my knowledge and ideas in order to help make my art more relevant and personal. At this time, I applied for the M. A. in Art Education at Concordia University. I also discovered that the Concordia Fine Arts Program had a ceramics studio. I decided to take a 300-level ceramics undergraduate course during my first year of Masters studies at Concordia, in order to improve my knowledge of three-dimensional art-making. This was all a step toward achieving my childhood dream of becoming a potter.

In the studio courses I took here in Canada, I experienced art education philosophies and teaching methods different from those that I had been accustomed to in China. My ceramics classes focused on ideas (political issues, students’ background and emotions, gender, religion and culture). On the other hand, my studio classes in China taught specific skills (physical, technical). Most notably, I noticed that students in my ceramics and art education classes focused more on the “self”. They used terms such as *I*, *my feeling*, and *my family*, rather than technical terms, which are used by Chinese

students. In addition, Canadian art instructors encourage students to interact more personally with their teachers. Through this process, students can initiate and elaborate their ideas so as to create art. For example, one student starts telling a story in class, then the other students and the art instructor clarify the ideas, give feedback and share their opinions in order to help this student build clearer ideas and determine effective methods for creating his/ her own artwork.

At the beginning of my ceramics studio class, I felt it was very difficult to talk about my personal feelings and emotions in class. The reason for this, in a large part, is because of what Confucius said, “It is rare, indeed, for a man with cunning words and an ingratiating face to be benevolent” (Lau, 1979, p. 59). Also in Tao Te Ching (1986), Lao Tzu said:

*To use words but rarely
Is to be natural* (Lau, p. 28)

In these quotes, it can be understood how the majority of the Chinese people feel about expressing personal ideas. It is, therefore, not hard to imagine that Chinese people, under the influences of Confucianism and Taoism, consider that personal feelings and emotions are private. Clearly, this is not the case in Western culture.

CHAPTER 4

Meaning Through Making: A Conceptual Framework

How my Chinese art education background helped me to learn ceramics

As mentioned previously, when I began a ceramics course in Canada, I found this new learning experience to be very difficult for two reasons: (1) English was difficult to understand and (2) learning ceramics in Canada was novel for me because of the teaching methods. However, at this time, my Chinese educational background, which emphasizes skills training, helped me to start learning on my own, regardless of the difficulty I was having adjusting to Canada. The inspiration for this may be found in the following quote:

According to the Chinese tradition of [art] education, a student, no matter what he or she is learning, must skilfully handle the relevant techniques first, then reach the 'inside spirit' or creativity (Duan, 1995, p. 2).

In order to achieve this, students are required to practice each step for a long time, until they have learned it well; only then can they move on the next step. In this sense, I was influenced by the Chinese educational philosophy of "practice makes perfect."² I began to teach myself ceramics in Canada and I developed a strong hands-on capability with clay through this disciplined practice.

Praxis: Learning through practice

One book which has helped me to support my belief that practice is the first step in learning art, is Studio Art: Praxis, Symbol, Presence, by Zurmuehlen. Most notably,

² The Chinese definition of "practice makes perfect," which practice as a verb, means to do (an action) repeatedly, or do an exercise regularly, in order to master a particular skill.

she tells a story of her nephew painting a picture. One day she saw her nephew seated at the dining room table with a paintbrush and paper. He covered a white piece of paper with stroke after stroke of orange paint. The little boy's mother (the author's sister) asked what he was making. He replied, "It's orange." The author was aware that her sister hoped that her son would say something a little more interesting. So, her sister followed his answer with another gentle question, "I see it's orange, but orange what?" He continued to paint and said, "It's an orange wall" (p. 1). My interpretation of this story was that the author uses her nephew's "orange wall" to express the idea that the artistic process begins first with making and then naming. Subsequently, I think that sometimes adults should create art as children do in this example because, when children make paintings and drawings, they only concentrate on the act of creation and do not consider their artwork for its political, religious, gender, ethical, economical and cultural issues. Just as was with the two-year-old boy who only used orange as a colour and did not think about naming it; he simply painted orange.

I agreed with Zurmuehlen's concept of "do it first" focus on creation, not explanation, and I applied this idea to my studio work in ceramics. For example, at the beginning of my studies, I only wanted to make pottery--a small bowl, cup, or container. For this reason, I used my first ceramic studio courses to examine the concept of "do it," *then* "name it," for both making art and teaching art. I told myself "just focus on making the piece first; don't think about creating a masterpiece, just make *something*." I concentrated on learning how to use clay,

glazes and ceramics tools in the first semester of my courses. I then practiced applying that which I learned every day.

Founding demonstration and practice are beneficial to the beginner

It was my dream to be able to make pottery on the wheel, but I had not taken the first year ceramics course, where this was taught. Therefore, I did not have the basic skills to throw pieces on the wheel. This ignorance of these techniques and the lack of confidence prevented me at first from going further.

However, by good fortune, I discovered that my classmate, Geneviève, was very skilled at the wheel. I asked her to teach me how to throw properly. She agreed and showed me step by step how to make bowls and pots on the wheel. She patiently explained the techniques and repeatedly demonstrated them to me. The first thing, she taught me was how to make a bowl, because throwing a bowl is a basic process in the production of all pottery pieces. To do this, she first taught me how to wedge clay. Next, she showed me how to position myself on the wheel. She clearly explained and demonstrated these processes repeatedly. Following her demonstrations, I practiced again and again. She continuously encouraged me to keep practicing as much as I could. After I had made a number of pieces, she cut the unsatisfactory ones in half and, by looking at the cross-section, she pointed out mistakes and areas for further improvement. By doing this, she used both visual cues and hands on experience to help demonstrate how I could improve my technique. As I became more satisfied with my work, my technique improved more and more.

Thus, I am convinced that encouragement and personal satisfaction are the best motivations for a beginner to learn.

The participation of the instructor makes a difference

In my research, I also found that another important difference between Chinese and Canadian classrooms was the participation of the art instructor/teacher. In my experience within an undergraduate course at Concordia, I found something missing between the art instructors and the students. At Concordia, the art instructors are not around the studio very often, because classes meet with the teacher only once a week. In China, on the other hand, classes would meet from 8:00 in the morning to 12:00 noon, Monday through Saturday. The art instructor also had to be present in the classroom at all times in order to help students. In addition, art departments in China do not have technicians to demonstrate art-making skills. The technician was only in charge of the equipment or tools. It was the art teacher/instructor who had to demonstrate all the techniques, which were needed in class. Here at Concordia, art teachers infrequently demonstrate techniques. They invite outside artists or ask the technician to do the demonstration. I found that the technical learning capacity of students was much better when the instructor participated actively in class and was available on a regular basis.

The discovery of error through practice

I was very excited by the chance to make pottery when I first started. But after some time, I became frustrated because I could not do as well on the wheel as Geneviève.



(fig. 1)

Photo: Melonie Fullick

I was having technical problems that she could not show me how to correct. For example, after opening the clay, I could not lift the clay to make a cylinder without hurting my fingers on the wheel. Finally, Geneviève suggested that I take a course in pottery at the same place where she herself had learned to throw. This place was the college, Centre de Céramique Bonsecours.

So, I went to the Centre de Céramique Bonsecours and took the basic throwing workshop at night. I told the teacher of this class that I had learned how to throw from a friend, who was a former student at this college; but that I was having problems I didn't know how to solve. My teacher helped me correct my errors by showing me a simple adjustment to my technique. He taught me how to twist my fingers at the bottom of the clay, as I move down to lift it. By doing this, I learnt how to protect my fingers with clay and, therefore, move on to lift it properly (fig. 1). Consequently, I improved my technique and could make better pieces of pottery.

Through practice I found the artistic feeling

It was a very special Friday afternoon when I started to learn how to make coloured clay. On this day, I felt comfortable; working with the ceramics tools in the ceramics laboratory, I felt as if I was back in my parents' kitchen. The different ceramic tools, and the process of colouring clay, reminded me of the "good old days" back in my hometown when I cooked with my mother. For example, I used a teaspoon to measure the pigment for my ceramics in the same way that I had used a teaspoon to measure the soy sauce, sugar, salt, wine and vinegar in the kitchen.



(fig. 2)

Photo: Melonie Fullick

Ever since coming to Canada, I had missed my parents very much. When working with the clay, my memory was often directed back to China. However, while working, I also felt better, because it gave me a sense of satisfaction. So, to distract myself from being homesick and nostalgic, I worked very hard day and night. Then, one Friday, I had finished making a lot of hand-built bowls. But, a certain coloured porcelain bowl quickly became my favorite piece (fig. 2). Its shape, texture and colors were very attractive to me. I also greatly appreciated the feelings involved in the process that I had used to make it. It was the last bowl I made that day. I was tired but also very happy; I had the feeling of being one with the clay. My fingers were moving adeptly so as to get the shape I wanted. Suddenly a new idea crossed my mind: I told myself, "This time, I don't want to control the clay: I will follow the shape that the clay makes by itself."

I did not correct it and it turned out to have a very natural shape, just like a flower. Later on, I put three coats of clear glaze on the bowl, and fired it to cone 9. After it was unloaded from the kiln and while it was still warm, I used cold water to wash it, which caused a very beautiful cracking effect. I really admired the texture that the very thick but tender glaze took on. I love to look at the colors: orange-yellow and baby-pink, under the glossy and cracked glaze. When looking at these colors I always recall my feelings at this wonderful time; when the memories of my family in China mingled with my feelings for the clay and the bowl, which I made in my new country, Canada.

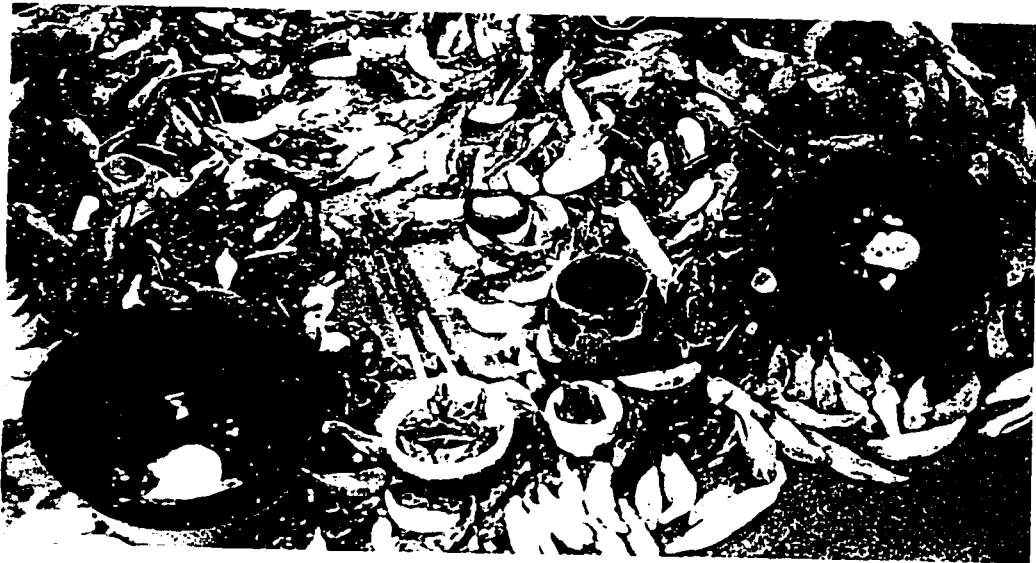
Some people might say that this bowl is not traditional because it isn't round the way a bowl usually is. However, in my eyes, it has a very appealing organic shape. I followed my feelings, which are reflected in the shape of the clay. For me, this is important because I believe that there is no fixed standard for beauty. The most important thing is to be faithful to your heart. The bowl and I became one: you could see me in it and see it in me. When my friends saw my colored clay bowl, they said this bowl showed my personality, my artwork style, and even my cooking style.

Beittel once said,

I know that the attitude endorsed here can be mind-boggling. My pots are as good as I can make them, but since that is never good enough, I sometimes try to make them less so-like part of nature, an object, a twig, a rock-each of which simply is, without any self-conscious thought of beauty (1990a, p. 10).

I agree with him, beauty comes from our hearts rather than our heads. Too much self-consciousness kills our imagination as well as our arts.

Yet, art-making is not just about hand actions, it also relates the art maker's personality and creativity. From this art-making experience, I have found my own way to express my vision and feeling within both the ceramic-making process and my daily life.



(fig. 3)

Photo: Sonia Martineau

CHAPTER 5

Students come from different backgrounds, have their own experiences, and develop personal ideas about life. A teacher must respect this reality. And, since I think that an art educator is a facilitator of students' learning processes, it is a great challenge to get to know students individually. It is necessary to understand them, to respect their different ideas about art and to help them to use their own culture and family history to find the ideas/sources for creating. For these reasons, I will describe the steps in completing my projects: "The River of My Memories," and "Chinese Red." My experiences in developing these projects provide a basis from which to construct a teaching method to encourage students to focus on their own life experience, family, and cultural backgrounds while making their own art. As demonstrated in these projects, I found a way to combine the art-making techniques, which I learned in China and Canada, with elements of my Chinese heritage in a contemporary Canadian context. In this thesis I plan to describe the creative processes I underwent while realizing my two projects, in order to demonstrate how I combined my Chinese art education background with new learning experiences in Canada.

Project I: The River of My Memories

As an artist I would like to use my art pieces to communicate with my audience and to share with them the memories that I have brought with me from my native land. Using my life experience to achieve the above objective, I employed images of 'food,' which have become important to me through my life experiences. In particular, I created a thousand chopstick holders in the shape of chili peppers (fig.3)

and placed them one after another to form a river. I called this, “The River of My Memories.”

The reason why I chose the number of one thousand was for three reasons that are very important to me. First, in Chinese culture, one thousand is a number that is considered large enough to express a strong wish or is believed to represent something powerful. Second, concerning my belief that “practice makes perfect,” in making one thousand pieces of art. I will not only have gained a lot of practice, but will also have had a powerful experience. And third, to create a ‘river’ of chili peppers on the floor simply requires a lot of pottery and, by using one thousand, I felt that I would be using a large enough number.

The reason behind this name is that this ‘river’ brings back memories of both China and Canada. A river is also a symbol of change, since it is impossible to “step into”³ the same water twice. Accordingly, you can never go back to the past; the water is already downstream. It is only your memories that you keep. They are the only things that connect the past to the present. They are your only method to access the people, places and things which previously touched your life.

In my project, “The River of My Memories,” I used chili pepper chopstick holders as a symbol of my love for my parents, my friends and those who helped me in China and Canada; love is part of my memories. This had a very special meaning

³ Heraclitus (2001), the ancient Greek philosopher, describes this in his aphorism number 41 when he states that “the river you set your foot just now is gone—those water giving way to this, now this”.

for me because when I came to Canada, from a very different culture, I was not accustomed to the term ‘love’--we do not often use this word in my language. Chinese people truly treasure the word ‘love’ and will not use it in spoken language because this would be ‘too easy.’ Rather, we spend our entire lives proving, experiencing, and showing ‘love’ through our actions--not our words. The action of making my chili pepper chopstick holders, and then giving them away, was an expression of my love. With all this, each chili pepper chopstick holder represented my past and my present, and because I used them in this exhibition, they will become a part of my life in future memories.

The reasons I chose chili pepper as the image for my art-making

As a teacher working in the field of art, I would like to use my everyday work to keep in touch with my artistic feelings. I would also like to present my personal art-making philosophy as an example to my students in the future. My chili pepper chopstick holders represent a good example of how to do this. For example, there were two reasons behind my decision to use this symbol. The first reason was my heritage: food, and how it is served, is a very important part of Chinese culture. We also have a long history of connecting food with pottery. As such, the chopstick holders have an obvious connection to both my culture and to food. They are also appealing because they could be functional as well as aesthetic and durable. In this way, they bring art into everyday life. Finally, I love to see them all together or individually, because each chili pepper carries its own beauty and contains a piece of my memory.

The second reason behind my decision was my connection to the cuisine from my home land (Szechwan), in which chili peppers are the most important ingredient. They taste great, warm your body in winter, sweat the moisture out of your bones in the summer, and hold medicinal qualities such as preventing arthritis (which is often caused by the humidity in the Szechwan basin area). I first had the idea to use the image of a chili pepper when I visited a friend of mine in Ohio, in the summer of 2000. While I was there, she showed me a picture, which she took at Shi You Road-a food market just behind my parents' old apartment (much like the Jean-Talon market in Montreal). It was a picture of many red chili peppers. I asked her to give me the photo of the chili peppers, but she refused because she only had one copy. However, their image hovered in my mind for a long time, until I finally thought, "I could make some of them for myself!"

How I decide to make each chili pepper chopstick holder by hand

Initially, I planned to use a mold to make each chopstick holder. I knew that if I used a mold, I could save a lot of time. However, I didn't want all the chili peppers to be identical. So, I looked for a reason to justify making hundreds and hundreds of different pieces. Clearly, the practice would fit with my methodology of "practice." But, what would the concept be? Then, the answer came to me in a story.

I will never forget the day when I heard about an art exhibition that involved candy. The story began when one of my M. A. classmates in the *Selected Topics in Art Education course (Learning in Museums)*, used a piece of green candy to present her

research. My classmate had taken it from a show at the Musée D'Art Contemporain de Montréal. It was one of many candies piled up like a small mountain in the corner of an exhibition room. Each audience member was allowed to take one, because each candy was like a memory of the artist's partner, who died of AIDS. The weight of the candies was equal to the weight of the artist's partner. I did not know exactly why, but this story lingered in my mind for a long time. I was touched and saddened by the story, but I did not feel satisfied with the way the artist used manufactured candy. I told myself that if I were he, I would have used hand-made wrapping paper for each candy. Therefore, each piece would be very special and unique. I think that for me it would mean more if I made everything by myself, by spending time, and putting love and effort into each piece. This would be the only way I could allow myself to express the love I felt. This story inspired me so much that I decided to make each chopstick holder by hand and suggest that the audience to take a chili pepper as a souvenir of my exhibition, to show my love.

At first, I was told by the technician to use low-fire glazes because it is very difficult to get the desired results with a high-fire glaze. The colour red is especially troublesome. So, I used white earthenware, which is low-fire clay and I went to a ceramics store to get some specific red low-fire glazes. They were expensive, so I only bought a few. Nevertheless, the high-fire option remained in my mind because these glazes can produce a very beautiful look, if used correctly. After the glaze firing, I did not feel satisfied with the result. The low-fire glazes I had used were commercial and had already been tested many times; I knew that the results would

always be the same. I found this boring, so I decided to use high-fire glazes, because pieces with the same high-fire glaze will have different results in the same kiln. I found this element of surprise very attractive and interesting. I looked forward to the challenge of experimenting. Also, the high-fire glazes were much cheaper, and more exciting than commercial glazes.

I used many different methods to glaze the chopstick holders. For example, I used the same glaze on several different clay bodies, such as sculpture porcelain, translucent porcelain, and stoneware. Also, I combined two or more glazes on the same piece in order to achieve different effects. With high-fire glazes, I could use the same glaze over and over again in various ways, so that every piece would look different.

Why did I sign my name on each chili pepper chopstick holder?

In my first year of learning ceramics, I only thought about learning the basics of the medium, such as how to make clay, create a form from the clay, work on the wheel, glaze, and fire the pieces. I did not expect to be able to create or make huge, elaborate pieces. At the very beginning, I wanted to learn how to use the clay to get the results I wanted. Then, in the second year, I began to challenge myself. I encouraged myself to improve my techniques. I learned how to use pigment to mark the glaze test tiles, and from this process, I learned how to sign my name on my ceramic pieces. This became a very significant step for me, because signing my name on my artwork symbolized not only the memory of my family, but also the

return to Chinese traditional art.

The reason for this was that there is a close relationship between Chinese painting and Chinese character writing, or calligraphy. In fact, in the past, Chinese painting and calligraphy was thought to have the same origin. Moreover, a typical Chinese painting contains three elements: painting, calligraphy and personal seals. Personal seals always serve as a finishing touch by the artist, functioning as the end of an artwork. I signed my name at the bottom of each chili pepper chopstick holder. The signature signifies my personal seal, my identity and my personality.

In Chinese culture, we always put the family name before the given name, because our culture is a family-oriented one, originating from ancestor-worship. My name in Chinese should be spoken as Tang Jing Ping (唐璟萍). Tang (唐) is my family name. Jingping (璟萍) is my given name. These are really two characters in Chinese, so they should be written as Jing (璟) and Ping (萍).

My love for my father emerged from the use of my signature in Chinese characters, because it was he who gave me my name. Chinese people and Western people share the same passion for naming their children. I found that many westerners are named after some characters in the Bible. Their parents wanted them to have God's blessing. When I was two months old, my mother went to a fortune-teller, who told my mother that I lacked water in my Wuxing (五行). Chinese people believed that

everything in the world is basically made up of “Five Phases [Wuxing: water, wood, earth, metal and fire] to the ultimate dichotomy, of Yin and Yang” (Graham, p. 408). For this, they decided to put some water in my name so as to balance my life system. That is why there is ‘氵’ in my third character Ping (萍). ‘氵’, which means water in Chinese. I remembered my mother telling me about how my father spent a long time going through the dictionary, finding a unique name for me and checking the words to make sure they were the right ones to use. He took the time to make sure that they would have a wonderful meaning and a beautiful sound.

My given name has a beautiful meaning and my parents’ blessing as well. Jing (璟) means ‘beautiful’ since it has ‘玉’ at the left part of the character. ‘玉’ is jade, the symbol of beauty and purity. Besides, (璟) Jing sounds close to (錦) Jin, which means Chengdu, my hometown. The third character in my name, Ping (萍), means floating weeds on the water. My father told me many years later that he wanted me to float away from my hometown to the outside but never forget where I had come from.

At the end of every three characters there is a ‘g’, so the pronunciation is fluent, and it’s easy for people to say my name. Chinese names can also be spoken in many different ways. My name can be said as Jingping (璟萍), Tang Ping (唐萍), or Ping (萍). These different compositions also allowed me to work with the aesthetic appeal of my chili peppers by writing my name in different ways.



(fig. 4)

Photo: Agnes Yang

Therefore, my name, the chili pepper, the chopstick holder and the seal on my artwork, all together, showed my identity and my uniqueness (fig.4).

My first idea for arranging the chili peppers

At first, I planned to present my chopstick holders on the ground and set them up like a game of dominoes. This idea originates as a memory from my childhood. My friends and I would take bricks onto the construction field behind my parents' apartment and play dominoes with them. We really enjoyed seeing them fall down one after the other and listening to the sound they made as they fell. It created a pattern of movement and sound on the ground. I was so excited to push the first brick over. The meaning of this game was embodied in the process rather than in the result. This is quite similar to my understanding of art making. What matters is not only the final product but also the process of creation. When I recalled this game, I could remember that we were always arguing about how to set up the bricks and who would get to push the first one. Because of those arguments, we had to set them up many times so that everybody would have a chance to arrange them according to his or her own idea, and everybody would get a chance to push the first brick over. Every time, we were so excited to see them fall one after the other. I always associate the sound of the bricks hitting each other with the sound of our laughter, because the two sounds were always heard together. This was the first idea I had about how to present my chopstick holders. Later on, I discovered that this idea was not practical, because each of my chopstick holders was fragile. But, from

this initial idea, I focused on setting my chili pepper chopstick holders up one after one on the floor. I then realized that this image also looked like a river; from this came the “River of My Memory River” title.

Project II: Chinese Red

Art as a way of self-expression

It is very important that art teachers understand that methods of self-expression differ from one culture to another. This will help them to encourage their students to use their own cultural background in creating art. This teaching methodology also helps students to have a chance to take a closer look at their own cultural background, to have contact with their heritage, and to help them to understand their own culture. Then, the art teacher can help students create art pieces that fully express their unique character and teach them to know and understand their own and different cultures, so that they can combine culture and art together.

For me this project, “Chinese Red”, is an illustration of how I combine culture and art. By examining my own pottery making technique, (together with the resulting artwork), which was affected by personal feeling and thought, I can show the benefit of understanding the effect culture has on my art-making process. My project does this by examining glazing techniques as well as throwing and firing techniques; and the final colour on each piece. This way I demonstrate how two years of practice have given me the ability to produce a specific colour; a colour that has a great deal

of cultural significance. In this, the project involved throwing porcelain pottery pieces, which were glazed red on the inside and covered with black terra sigillata on the outside, and fired to Cone 9-10 reduction.

In my project “Chinese Red,” I again used pottery as a symbol of my family and my family history. It was in my research (on both learning about and making ceramics) that I finally found the way to express personal meaning in my artwork, which also incorporated my Chinese cultural background and the Chinese philosophy that I was raised with. This art-making process helped me to understand that, in my culture, pottery is important. This understanding also helped me to express my emotions and reflect upon my culture within the pottery pieces that I create. Accordingly, I used my “Chinese Red” project to explore the symbolic colours, red and black, that is, the balance of Yin and Yang, as it relates to my family and family history. In this, I also define my conception of functionality and durability, in accordance with my artistic process (thinking, making, and understanding).

This project was a way for me to display all the skills I had learned in ceramics over the past two years. I chose the throwing technique because this was something that I had always wanted to learn and use. The very idea of throwing excited me. I thought back to the time when I first began to work in ceramics, when I was so clumsy that I even had difficulty making a piece by hand. But, now my skills and confidence have improved so much that nothing scares me. If something seems very difficult, I see it as a challenge. For instance, I chose porcelain as my clay body for

this project, which is the most difficult type of clay to throw with because it is a translucent, non-absorbent clay body that can only be fired at high temperature. I also chose to use reduction glaze firing because of the way this reduction gas firing will create a second chemical reaction in the kiln (the first is the fire with the clay and second is the fire with the glaze). This second reaction will make the end result very unpredictable, which obviously adds to the level of difficulty. The difficulty is worth it, however, because this all provides the artist with a very mysterious process; you will never know what 'you get' until the firing process is over. In addition, this is also the only kind of clay body that provides a good red glaze effect. So, after one and a half years of practicing on the wheel and overcoming problems with my throwing, glazing and firing techniques, I was finally able to get the effects I wanted. For this reason, "Chinese Red," was more than just a display of my skills. It was a demonstration of all that I learnt, it was an example of my methodology in its physical form (practice makes perfect), it was a metaphor of my teaching philosophy (lead by example), and it was expression of who I am. Finally, in this project, I was able to show respect for China, because porcelain was first discovered and developed there.

For this project, I practiced all my techniques thoroughly before focusing on my cultural background. In this way, it was easier for me to convey these ideas because I had mastered the methods of conveyance. I overcame all the most difficult obstacles that were in my path and, through practice, learnt how to accomplish everything that I planned to do. I had truly combined the Eastern ideas of learning

and putting techniques first with what I learnt in Canada, which was to focus on the personal meaning behind art-making methods.

Each of the pottery pieces in this project represents me. I believe that, just as Yanagi (1989) does, objects are born and not made. And for me, every piece is my “child.” The pain of hard labor and the joy of creation is similar to the pain of delivery and pleasure of giving life to a newborn child. This project also shows that my Chinese philosophy is found in my art pieces: that they should be durable and functional. Buddhists, like myself, believe that nothing should ever go to waste. This is evident in my project because these pieces are cups, bowls, plates and chopstick holders, which can be used over and over again.

Techniques helped me to express my ideas

At the time that I conceived of the project called “Chinese Red,” I already knew how to make pottery on the wheel, but the challenge was to use red glazes successfully. Reds are the most volatile and the most technically difficult glazes to work with. I always wanted to master red glazing even before this project. But I started to question my skills in achieving red glazes on my pieces. Impulse is not enough; I had to know the techniques necessary to express this passion in my ceramics.

In the end, a long process of practice taught me the necessary skills. For instance, during my Project I: “The River of My Memories,” I had decided to make chili peppers and needed a red glaze. As previously mentioned, I did not want to use



(fig. 5)

Photo: Geneviève Sainte-Marie

uniform commercial glazes, but had trouble getting the effects I wanted from high-fire (cone 9) reduction glazes. I participated in many gas kiln firings, because due to the nature of reduction firing, there was no way to tell if the glaze would turn out or not in any one particular firing.

In order to get good reduction glazes, I asked for help from the technician, my classmates and a former Concordia ceramics student who had great deal of experience in using the biggest and best gas kiln. Here, I was already planning on using this kiln for my "Chinese Red" project. All of these people, who assisted me, shared their own experiences in getting the beautiful red glazes; they helped me to master the technical difficulties, and helped me achieve the red glaze results that I expected. For example, they taught me how to choose glazes and then helped me analyze the glaze recipes, which had been tested by my classmates. Afterward, they told me how to glaze the pieces and load the gas kiln for reduction firing. On the day that I loaded the kiln, the technician, other classmates and my friends came to help me choose the best way to load and stack the kiln (fig. 5). When we finished loading the kiln, Geneviève (my best friend at school), and her boyfriend sang a song. This was a very beautiful African song that talked about nature and beauty. I knew this song would bring me good luck, because our friendship brought me confidence and good energy.

The meaning of red

During this project, I passed my third Chinese New Year (which is called the Spring Festival (春 節) in Chinese) alone in Canada. I was unable to return home to be with my parents and I felt the feeling of being homesick was always with me. In China, the Spring Festival, is an occasion for family reunion. It is an important family holiday because, on New Year's Eve (the last day of the twelfth moon in the Chinese lunar calendar), the entire family gathers for a sumptuous meal. The principal ritual activity during the festival is known as the "New Year's Visiting" wherein relatives and friends go to each other's houses and exchange greetings. Spring Festival carnivals vary from place to place, offering lantern and flower displays and the ever-popular lion and dragon dances. Usually, on the door of every house, two strips of red paper with good-luck couplets will be pasted symmetrically. The colour red is everywhere. The significance of this colour is also seen in how the majority of Chinese people generally believe in the power of their dead ancestors. Our family-oriented culture originates from ancestor-worship and adds extra meaning to the family reunion. The memorial ceremony for dead ancestors thus becomes a very important part of Spring Festival. For this reason, the Spring Festival is not just a family gathering but also a family religious ceremony. And, because family members are connected by blood, red also becomes a divine colour; it is a colour filled with the ancestors' blessings, and also is a colour associated with luck, prosperity, 'fu' (福) good fortune, and 'xi' (喜) happiness.

Through art-making I share my heritage

In other Chinese families, it is normally the mother and grandmother who supervise the special preparations for the Spring Festival. However, my family lost an entire generation to the 1949 revolution. Therefore, the memorial ceremony of the sacrifice to ancestors is a very important part of the Spring Festival in my family. At this time, it is my mother and my great-grandmother who make the preparations for every Spring Festival's Eve. They bring out the collection of old, precious pottery from the cabinets, which has been in my family for many generations. This solemn occasion is full of meaning and emotion for the whole family. These beautiful ceramic objects contain not only food, but also the memories of my entire family. This ritual helps me understand how deeply symbolic these objects are.

When I sit at my wheel with the clay between my hands, and I create a bowl or a cup, I think of my family and forget my personal troubles. I still remember how 40 or 50 relatives would gather at my great-grandmother's house in the countryside to eat and celebrate together. I meditate upon these beautiful memories, and true to my Zen beliefs, I pass these thoughts to my pottery through my hands.

How other artworks inspire me

During this particular Spring Festival in 2001, as I worked hard on research for my M. A. thesis, I was extremely lonely. My roommate had gone back to China for her family reunion and my best friend Yu left for California to stay with her husband. Before Yu had left, she gave me a videotape to help me pass the time. That night, I

watched it and was stunned. The movie was "The Red Violin" (Girard, 1998). It is a story about the fate of a violin and its journey through history and across the world. I was especially touched by the first episode when the craftsman used his wife's blood to paint his favourite violin, a masterpiece, for his unborn son. His wife died during childbirth, as did his newborn son. But, through a mystical bond, the blood connected his wife and his infant son to the instrument, as life passed from his wife to the masterpiece he made. Seeing this, I suddenly understood why I took ceramics courses and chose pottery as the object of my art project; I understood the importance of the colour red in my culture, and felt I *had* to use it to express my love for my family and for myself. Therefore, I decided the best way to express what I had learned about my culture and myself was to make red pottery. Also, this movie inspired me to make my own video to document my art-making and learning process in Canada. I decided this video would be a gift for my parents.

Another source of inspiration for me was the book Post-Partum Document (1983), by Kelly. In this book, she documented the post-partum period of her daily life, from the point when her son was born until he was five years old. Her purpose in this was to record her son's growth and hold onto these precious memories. For her, this documentation was the physical representation of these memories. This way, she was recreating their daily lives together, which was a means to artistic expression. For example, she states that "art-making of any kind is a means of asserting the artist's existence" (p. xi). Her artworks inspired me to use photography and video as a tool to document my Projects, "The River of My Memories" and

“Chinese Red,” which I use to illustrate this concept. It also led me to believe that art itself, as a document of the artists’ daily life, is another important concept in art education. Because of this, I decided to document my art education experiences in Canada as data for future studies. I kept a journal, took photographs, video taped and recorded my two years of ceramics and art education classes in Canada.

All this inspired me to show a video of my artistic process during my graduation exhibition. Through watching this video, my audience could share my experiences with me. And, at the end of my video, I had a special message to convey; I spoke directly to my parents: “Thank you daddy, thank you mom, thank you for teaching me how to be a human being, how to study, how to respect work and life.” As I discussed previously, this video will ultimately serve as an appendix to my thesis.

Personal philosophy of life-Buddhism and Zen

Nature is mysterious. It is simply beyond the scope of our understanding, and no matter how close human beings may think we come to nature, we can never fully control it. As Beittel said, there is a mysterious “kiln God” (1990b, p. 97) in nature, who stands beyond our conceptions and aesthetic criticism. This god controls the fate of every piece in a kiln. Through firing, pottery faces the full force of elemental flame. My classmates always joked, ‘keep your fingers crossed when you are firing.’ When you shut the lid of a kiln, “the accidents of forming and firing say it all” (Beittel, 1990b, p. 111). When my pieces were firing, I told myself, “God will help me to get my Chinese red! Because I have tried my best!” Here, my prayer to

God for help was mixed with the same “non-action” (*wuwei* 無為)⁴ advocated by Taoism and Zen. If you realise that God is the true creator, it will not be hard for you to accept “non-action.”

During this project, I discovered that even the process of loading and firing the kiln is related to my faith in Buddhist beliefs: trust and faith are important to the balance of life. Loading a piece into a kiln is an act of faith in both my technique and in the fire. I trust that I have done everything I can when preparing the clay, throwing on the wheel, making the glaze, glazing, loading and firing so as to make my pieces beautiful; this also clearly supports the principles of “practice makes perfect.”

I strongly believe in the idea of balance. The balance of Yin and Yang is not simple symmetry; it is complete symmetry. There is Yin in Yang and there is Yang in Yin. This way of thinking shows how Chinese people live their lives in harmony, side by side with the concepts of Yin and Yang. The art of pottery is a typical example of the harmony between Yin and Yang. In our culture, the earth belongs to Yin while the fire belongs to Yang. Once you put your work into the kiln, the process is now beyond your control. You must let the nature decide the shape and colour. Only Nature (God) can handle the delicate balance of Yin and Yang.

However, this does not mean that I can simply do nothing for my work. Rather, I

⁴ “For the Daoist, all human actions being *wei* [爲] (artificial, false), it is best not to act (*wuwei*) and repudiate the human intention (that is, return to nature). For the Buddhist, action is *karma*; its cessation is the prerequisite for *nirvana*. Both Daoists and Buddhists are suspicious of the point of acting, and seem often to be in favour of inaction” (Leaman, 2001, p 10)



(fig. 6)

Photo: Melonie Fullick

must know when to stop working and follow the rules of Yin and Yang. Only through this balanced approach may I achieve my goals within each piece. For example, as I was developing 'my' red glazes, I discovered that the red glazes run, and this can ruin a kiln. To solve the problem, I turned again to the philosophy of Yin and Yang in which black represents the opposite of red, that is, death, sorrow and suffering. It also helped me to understand why good-luck couplets are written in black ink on red paper; why the colours of traditional Chinese art always connect with red and black. From that moment on, all my "Chinese Red" project pieces were glazed red on the inside and covered with black terra sigillata on the outside (fig.6).

For all these reasons, the pieces in this project are the conclusion to my two years of studies in ceramics. Through them, I feel that I have achieved all that I set out to do. Most significantly, I achieved a balance between Western and Eastern art.

Final exhibition

In the spring of 2001, I held my final exhibition at the Concordia University Loyola Campus' library and Student Centre. I chose to use this space, because I had spent two years working there; this was the space where I had grown as an artist/educator, gained new knowledge, and made new friends--It was my school in Canada (my new country). In this exhibition, I showed more than three hundred pottery pieces and both of my projects: "The River of My Memories" and "Chinese Red."

In this exhibition, I chose to pursue an effective way to help people understand my belief that words combined with demonstrations are a much more effective teaching methodology than words alone. I believe that the benefit of such a teaching method is that it can help to gain the students' trust, because it helps to prove the students that the teacher has knowledge and ability, therefore they will feel that they can learn from and trust this teacher. It is also an easy way for students to learn the art-making process through observation.

At the beginning of my exhibition, I gave a short opening lecture. At this time, I offered a brief overview of the two years of learning and the processes I experienced during my master's degree at Concordia. I explained my art-making and art teaching philosophy, which complemented the overall experience of this exhibition. At the end of my lecture, I also announced that every art piece displayed in the show could be touched and that all audience members could take a chilli pepper with them as a souvenir. Finally, I presented my video, entitled "Art Practice," to the audience.

In this exhibition, a thousand chili pepper chopstick holders were placed on the floor of the front lobby of the library building. These chili peppers formed the shape of a river, which I called "The River of My Memories." In this exhibition, the chili pepper chopstick holders directed the audience through my exhibition by allowing them to "follow the river."

In various places, next to the chili peppers, pottery exhibits were set up where the

audience could observe my work, which is also filled with my memories. I chose to show more than three hundred pottery pieces in order to show the effect of practice. All these objects were pieces I made when practicing, which helped to demonstrate the evolution of my skills in working with clay and the wheel. They were also examples of the Chinese educational philosophy, “practice makes perfect.” I have used this philosophy to guide my learning process in Canada and, as a result, I gained a strong grounding in technical ceramics processes. Also, through this philosophy, I found the ideas and theories to help me to create my own art. I therefore wanted the audience members who saw this exhibition to notice every step of my two years of learning experience in ceramics. The reason for this was that my personal learning process is also my teaching philosophy: hence, my personal learning process will reflect in my teaching. Through seeing my personal experience, the audience can realize, further accept, and be inspired by my art-making and teaching philosophy--practice really does pay off in the end and dedication is worth the effort.

In this exhibition, I also set my “Chinese Red” project pieces on white display stands beside my ‘memory river’ with some special personal belongings, which I brought from China. With this, I was able to present my culture and myself to the audience. Finally, I displayed photographs that documented the process of making. This helped the audience to learn more about ceramics.

In the end, I felt satisfied that my two-year learning process was conveyed effectively to the audience. They saw the end/final pieces, the process I went through to create these pieces, and the influences that inspired their creation. I therefore believe that they experienced my artistic philosophy--“practice makes perfect.”

The most important lesson I learnt from my projects and exhibition

While doing my research, I was helped in my understanding with the differences between the West and East from another former Chinese student, Lian Duan, who had a similar art education background. In his M. A. thesis he states: “I found that the basic concept of art education in the West was totally different from that in China” (1995, p. 4). In China, art education is more focused on art-making skills. He then explains that his understanding of today’s Western art education is that it is based on ideas from the Modernist art movement.

From my own experience in both art education systems, I can say: Canadians seem to emphasise the combination of theories and skills simultaneously, while the Chinese prefer to study skills first and often let your life and work shape your thought (theories) later. For me, both of these approaches are workable. We are all the products of such an education; we digest various thoughts and thus share in a diverse philosophy with everyone. The Chinese teaching method does not seem this efficient. Most students only learn skills while in school. After graduation, many of them lose touch with art due to a lack of ideas. Chinese art education focuses more

on skill training. According to A History of Modern Chinese Painting (Zhang Shaoxia and Li Xiaoshan, 1986),

According to the old philosophy of Chinese education, students must first learn how to skilfully handle the tools, master the techniques of art, learn all the skills and styles of the master, and then possibly develop their own art language. However, most traditional artists spoke in their ancestors' language, and not their own (Duan, 1995, p. 67).

I believe that this is why, after I graduated from university, I couldn't make my own art.

One of the most precious things I have learnt in Canada is, therefore, self-expression. Chinese people are too subtle to say the personal pronoun 'I' out loud. But, through my work in ceramics, 'I' joined an Eastern love of process with a Western love of self-expression and personal meaning. This includes expressing my emotions in my work, and also drawing from my cultural background, my heritage and my philosophy of life. This is not to say that Chinese art lacks self-expression; it is simply a form of expression that is defined much differently than that of Western understanding. Chinese self-expression is deeply rooted in traditional and cultural norms. In this sense, the self is a part of a larger historical and social process. It is this that hinders new personal ideas and developments from arising in Chinese art. An understanding of this is very important, because if art teachers can understand that the means of self-expression differs from one culture to another (and explore these different means with the students), they will be able to help students create art pieces that fully express their unique culture and personality.

In the end, I felt satisfied that my two-year learning process was shown to the audience. They saw the end results, the processes I underwent in creating these pieces, and the influences that inspired their creation. I therefore believe that they really *experienced* my artistic philosophy—"practice makes perfect."

CHAPTER 6

The value of my study at Concordia University

I conducted two years of research at Concordia University in undergraduate ceramic studio classes, while also reviewing my Chinese art educational influences. In doing this, I noticed that in China, the main concern of an art educator was technique while, at Concordia, the focus was on ideas and philosophies. Subsequently, during my studies in Canada, I managed to find my personal artist's language: to put personal expression into my art pieces. In this, I discovered that two different art educational focuses were very beneficial. The Canadian system maintains a focus on concept, such as how to collect ideas and how to *mine* one's own internal resources (like personal background, emotions, and life experiences). The Chinese system, conversely, focuses on skills and techniques, which gives form to ideas. By combining these two systems, in the creation of my two projects, I found that my skills improved greatly. But, more importantly, I found my own way to create.

In, and through, my own learning experiences, I have learnt what I wish to give to my future students. As Beittel states, the "Great Tradition absorbing all of man's traditions of making vessel forms in clay, from earliest time to the present, east and west" (1990b, p.12) is the tradition of technique. I find this idea particularly relevant because I have received a traditional Chinese art education, which emphasizes how to teach students to master the pure technique of an apprenticeship. Accordingly, my goal is to become the students' mentor. This way, I can guide them through learning

techniques, and share my own knowledge of art-making, so as to support them in their ideas as both a teacher and a friend.

During my combined cultural education, I found that the basic teaching philosophies were the same in theory, but not in practice. For example, both cultures attempt to use artistic practice as a way to cultivate students, and their lives, as an artist. But, in practice, this occurs in very different ways. In his M. A. thesis, Duan (1995) discusses this by describing how a Chinese teacher should perform according to a curriculum.

A good teacher should clearly be aware of why and how to use a certain curriculum; a good teacher must teach students in accordance with their aptitudes; a good teacher must be aware of the importance of self-education which is not only the skill of doing art, but mainly all sorts of knowledge about art and other related subjects (p. 119).

In this, the concepts that support the ideas of an art education sound very similar to those of Western concepts. This is made further apparent by Wilson, in his article, The Second Search: Metaphor, Dimensions of Meaning, and Research Topics in Art Education (1997), which contains the following quote:

The principal goal for art education is students' acquisition of special knowledge, insights, and understanding--of self, of the realities of past and present worlds, of imagined and future realities, and of the norms by which individuals govern their lives--that come from works of art. The goal for art education is for students to connect the idea-filled works of art they create to artworks of others--artworks from other times and their time, from other places and their place, from other peoples and their people--whose meaning students interpret. The goal for arts education is that students will also connect the artworks they create and interpret to significant works and ideas from other disciplines and realms of experience, and finally write the special art-pervaded knowledge, insights, and understandings they have acquired into the texts of their own lives within and beyond school (p. 3).

Clearly then, the goals of art education in both cultures are very similar, but the steps taken to achieve these goals are very different.

My view on teaching art in ceramics

To begin with, teachers should help guide their students develop an initial idea for each project. Every student is different, so each student will need help according to his or her needs. Some students may already have a strong idea of what they want to do and, thus, will need only technical assistance. Other students might need more help in developing and refining a concept. This is an interesting teaching challenge because only techniques can be taught-- only in technical areas can there be a right or wrong solution to a problem. Ideas, on the other hand, must be created by the student. The teacher can help develop them but the answer can only come from within the student.

One of the most important things a teacher can do, nevertheless, is to show a student the right techniques to convey an idea (once it is fully formed). The teacher has the technical expertise that will help the student fully realize his or her piece. Teachers therefore have the responsibility to instruct their students on technical matters.

Lack of technical knowledge on behalf of a student can lead to many disastrous situations, especially in a medium such as ceramics, where firing a glaze at the wrong temperature will result in a completely different (and often undesirable) effect. Furthermore, the wrong type of clay and glaze used in some firings can ruin a kiln. Consequently, the teacher should help the students learn, first-hand, how to use clay, choose the right glaze, and fire the kiln. For their part, students should be able to meet technical challenges, as well as express their ideas fluently during class. In this, when a piece fails to convey an idea because of technical difficulties on the part of the student, both the teacher and student

should claim responsibility. A teacher should thus keep in close touch with the student, keeping track of their progress, and advise them when need.

Conclusion

Cultures provide different ways of self-expression. However, no two students from the same culture are identical. Life experiences shape and affect our view towards the world around us. As such, an art teacher needs to help students represent their views of the world through an art piece. In this, they must know as much as possible about their students' life experiences. The more teachers are aware of the students' own learning abilities, and requirements, the closer the teachers' suggestions will be to the students' world-view.

My research has taught me to find a starting point for people who are interested in combining art education systems and approaches from both oriental and occidental sources. I believe that this combination could ultimately result in a system of values and approaches more diverse and enriching. In the end, I hope that the benefits of combining each system of beliefs, and approaches, will allow all my future students, whatever their heritage, the advantage of a cultural synthesis.

GLOSSARY

Please note that all the excerpts in the following glossary are taken from C. F. Speight and J. Toki's (1999) book Hands in clay.

Bisque [bisquit]: Unglazed ceramic ware that has been fired at a low temperature to remove all moisture from the clay body and to make handling easier during glazing.

Bisque firing: The process of firing ware at a low temperature, usually from cone 010 to 05, to produce bisque ware.

Body [clay body]: Any blend of clays and nonplastic ceramic materials that is workable and has certain firing properties. Clay bodies are formulated to serve particular purposes and to achieve maturity at various firing temperatures.

Centering: The act of forcing a lump of clay by hand into a symmetrical form at the center of a spinning potter's wheel in preparation for throwing pottery.

Ceramics: Objects made from earthy materials with the aid of heat, or the process of making these objects.

Clay: A variety of earth materials formed by the decomposition of granite. In the process, these may have been combined with a variety of other materials, forming clay bodies with differing maturing points.

Dipping: Applying glaze or slip to the body by immersing the piece and shaking off excess glaze.

Earthenware: Pottery that has been fired at low temperature (below cone 2) and is porous and relatively soft. Usually red or brown in color. Used worldwide for domestic ware, glazed or unglazed.

Firing: heating pottery or sculpture in a kiln or open fire to bring the clay or glaze to maturity. The temperature needed to mature a specific clay or glaze varies.

Glaze: Any vitreous coating that has been melted onto a clay surface by use of heat. Made of fine-ground minerals that, when fired to a certain temperature, fuse into a glassy coating. Glazes may be matt or glossy, depending on their components.

Glaze firing: [also called **glost firing**] The firing during which glaze materials melt and form a vitreous coating on the clay body surface.

High-fire: Describes clays or glazes that are fired from cone 2 up to cone 10 or 13.

Kiln: A furnace or an oven built of heat-resistant materials for firing pottery or sculpture, sometimes referred to as a *kil*.

Low-fire: The range of firing of clays and glazes in which the kiln temperature reached is usually in the cone 015 to cone 1 range.

Plasticity: The ability of a damp clay body to yield under pressure without cracking and to retain the formed shape after the pressure is released.

Porcelain: A translucent, nonabsorbent body fired at high temperature. White and hard, it was first developed in China. Traditionally fired in the 2370°-2340°F/1220°-1280°C range.

Terra sigilata: A fine slip glaze used by Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans to coat their pottery. It fired black or red according to the kiln atmosphere. Now used in a wide variety of colors by many potters and sculptors to surface their ware or sculpture.

Throwing: Forming objects on the potter's wheel using a clay body with plastic

qualities (see plasticity).

Wedging: Any one of various methods of kneading a mass of clay to expel the air, get rid of lumps, and prepare a homogeneous material.

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