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## CROSSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: NEW ZEALAND VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN (VCD) TEACHERS WORKING WITH VCD LEARNERS IN CHINA

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### **Abstract**

Developing intercultural awareness within transnational education and design pedagogy presents opportunities and challenges for educators. For two New Zealand VCD teachers travelling to China to teach, undertaking a cultural project demanded a receptiveness to culturally appropriate ways of working. This article reveals issues and discoveries made during an undergraduate learning project, involving the design of playing cards at Hunan City University (HCU) in Yiyang, China. Reported here, is a pedagogical approach underpinned by the strategic design thinking process, where learners explored local Miao indigenous tribal stories and cultural motifs to inform a stylistic treatment for a deck of cards. Ensuring that the content for the project had relevance for the Chinese VCD learners, involved a search for reference material that was appropriate, authentic and local. Concerns regarding appropriations and transformations of historic and contemporary cultural identity and artefacts destined for intercultural encounters have been highlighted. Such issues are echoed in translated literature. Early ethnographic observation and textual storytelling descriptions, suggests that historical representations of Miao cultural icons and artefacts included inventive reconstructions and reimagining. To avoid colonial pedagogical project critique, I argue an awareness and deep appreciation of local cultural stories and icons may be enabled by fostering co-creation relationships. This article highlights the contribution of a Miao cultural advisor in the classroom to rethink and redefine content during the learning process and offers a perspective on how design educators may navigate sensitivities when crossing cultural boundaries in China.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to report on an undergraduate VCD cultural project undertaken in China. Through the duration of the project, conducting a learning experience which drew on cultural icons and contexts which differed from the educators' own required management. As educators working in New Zealand, myself and my colleague had experience of teaching New Zealand students about the sensitive integration of Māori motifs, considered collective property into design work. This has required consultation by teaching staff and students to avoid cultural misrepresentation (Young, 2010), and an emphasis on acquiring a deep understanding of the meanings

and stories from which the motifs derive. But working in China we were aware that we were of outsider or other status, and of wanting to explore local Miao cultural icons while avoiding perpetuating the colonial project by exoticising Miao culture (Deal & Hostetler, 2006).

The ambiguous nature of design pedagogies within internationalization results in educators struggling to accept ideas or concepts that arise from different cultural backgrounds (Caldwell & Gregory, 2016; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Intercultural communication and learning continue to be issues for educators not only on home soil but for those who are travelling to exotic destinations to teach (Heffernan, Morrison, Basu, & Sweeney, 2010; Thuraisingam *et al.*, 2012). Powerful critiques have been directed at educators exporting western pedagogy and perpetuating colonial stereotypes and activities as they undertake international opportunities (Yang, 2014). Further exacerbating these issues, specifically for design educators, is the challenges of using of cultural icons for student work. Importing western cultural icons may be inappropriate, and the use or misuse of local icons has dangers or risks. Cultural misrepresentation can be offensive, perpetrate stereotypes, and potentially foster discrimination (Young & Haley, 2009).

The teaching of VCD learners in this project is situated within a small-scale, cross-border transnational partnership agreement (Doyle, 2016) between Whitireia New Zealand and HCU in Hunan, China. Two New Zealand VCD educators conducted a pedagogical VCD project which was initiated by Long Xiangping, Head of the School of Art and Music at HCU. Long Xiangping proposed that a VCD project be devised which used Miao motifs in some way. For some time China's provincial areas have been undergoing a renaissance where cultural units are distinguished and place-based identity established (Oakes, 2000). Long Xiangping comes from the Miao tribe and as a result, some of the learning that takes place at HCU celebrates his origins. The process began with a visit to the Shanjiang Miao Museum which is in Western Hunan (Xiangxi). Miao artefacts were observed and photographed. Through New Zealand eyes, a colourful medley of stylised flowers, animals and geometric shapes was discovered, and translators gave a glimpse into mythical Miao stories.

In this article, and in order to gain a deeper understanding of the stories we had been told at the museum, translated literature encompassing early ethnographic observation and textual storytelling descriptions was analysed. Two key issues were identified, first, historic and contemporary use of cultural identity and artefacts is manipulative and may involve appropriations and transformations destined for intercultural encounters (Campos, 2015), and second, historical representations of Miao cultural icons and artefacts included inventive reconstructions and reimagining (Deal & Hostetler, 2006; Rubiés & Ollé, 2016). Despite this, a number of illustrative and photographic examples were found and used as influencers in support of the learning experience. Learner playing card designs are presented which exemplify those influences. The use of playing cards as a format to display the motifs is rationalised by evidence which attributes the origins of playing cards to China, and a suggestion that cards were used as portable samples in the transmission of print techniques from east to west (Carter, 1925; Lo, 2000).

Being exposed to these new cultural stories and icons, led to a co-creation relationship between the educators and the Head of the School. I elaborate on this relationship by highlighting the contribution of a Miao cultural advisor in the classroom in order to consult, rethink and redefine content during the learning process. In part there was an emergence of mutual interest and openness to learn from the other. For the cultural advisor to learn about the pedagogical intent and the design educators to learn about Miao culture. The article concludes by suggesting that the role of educators may be viewed as part of a collaborative process rather than that of outsiders or others.

### **Learning about Miao**

Miao is a highly contested term (Deal & Hostetler, 2006). Miao are officially classified as one of 55 minority Chinese nationalities (shaoshu minzu). It has been argued that Miao is a hypothetical construct designed to ensure Han dominance (Campos, 2015). Campos suggests there are at least 60 different cultural branches of Miao, with researchers generally agreed on four self-classified cultural groups: the Hmu, Hmong, Ghaio Xong, and the A Hmao. Deal and Hostetler (2006) view the term Miao as a Chinese 'ethnonym,' rather than an indigenous word with many Miao living outside of China self-identifying as Hmong (p. xxv.) The broader Miao designation into usage in the 1950s when the Chinese government used the umbrella term nationality to combine many different subgroups through linguistic distinctions (Wu, 2013).

By distinguishing the different nationalities in China, another layer of complexity is added to the already problematic use of *Chinese*, which associates the term with internationalisation and western colonial dominance (Yang, 2014). Within The Peoples Republic of China popular use of Chinese is synonymous with Han but it can also refer to other ethnic groups. Han is an ancient word that has undergone significant change in usage and meaning over time (Deal and Hostetler, 2006). The most recent change came at the beginning of the early twentieth century when Han became associated with ethnic nationalism. It was used to politically unite Chinese people in opposition to Manchu, the ruling house. It should be noted that the majority of students studying VCD at HCU are Han.

With two staff members from HCU, one a visual arts educator and the other an English language teacher, we travelled to Shanjiang Miao Museum situated 20 kilometers northwest of Tuo River Town, Fenghuang County in Western Hunan (Xiangxi), China. Xiangxi is formally an ethnic minority Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, home to 30 official ethnic groups, one of the prominent groups is the Hmong-Mein Miao. Hmong-Mein Miao are a sub-group of Miao, and the people speak a Xiangxi Miao dialect which comes from the Hmongic branch of the Hmong-Mein language family (Wu, 2013).

From the cultural artifacts and for the purposes of the playing card project, textiles photographed at the Shanjiang Miao Museum were used as the main source of motif representation. The predominant colour seen in the Xiangxi style is Hong (red) Miao which has been identified as one of five stylistic Miao textile categories (Campos, 2015; Cao, 1994). The issue with classification identifiers based on textiles

or some other characteristic such as hair styles, is that they have been dismissed by anthropologists and ethnologists as superficial (Deal & Hostetler, 2006). Similarly Cao (1994) simplistically attributes symbols created in the Xiangxi textile style to include: pomegranates to represent a growing family, and intertwined phoenixes and dragons to signify a happy marriage. Such descriptions were brought to life through the stories that we were told by the museum translators and HCU staff. The stories were intriguing and full of colourful descriptions. We concluded that the stories had the potential to ensure that the content for the playing cards would contain local content, hold relevance for the Chinese VCD learners and potential to be appropriate and authentic for Chinese audiences.

### **Miao stories and artefacts**

This section identifies key translated English texts and research that contributed knowledge of the Miao stories and characters which helped inform content for the project. In the hope of contributing to a common nomenclature for Chinese mythology, and like Strassberg (2000), I have followed existing translations of names that appear to be more commonly used.

#### *Jang Vang and the Miao ancestor stories*

Bender's (2006) *Butterfly mother: Miao (Hmong) creation epics from Guizhou* translates a collection of ancient epic songs from rich oral Miao traditions. Bender places the ancient songs in chronological order, so the narrative may proceed through a cycle of individual songs preceded by a prologue. He says the songs use personification and animistic views, for example in the *song of gold and silver*, when the sky and earth are created, a tiny crab, and a unicorn (possibly a rhinoceros) open the waterways for gold and silver to be transported to make the suns and moons. In *transporting gold and silver*, gold and silver are born; they suckle their mother and later marry. When it is found there are too many suns and moons Hsang Sa, the archer shoots them all down except the two that now remain in the sky.

The *song of butterfly mother* is performed during sacrifices made to the ancestors every 'twelve or seven years' (Bender, 2006, p. xxxi). This song describes a mythical butterfly whose love making with sloshing wave foam produced twelve eggs which are laid in a sweet gum tree. One of verses describes her hatchlings (the ancestors), which reveals some of the characters selected by the learners for the playing cards.

When they were all born,  
 they slept together in the nest.  
 The white one was Gha Hva;  
 the black one was Jang Vang;  
 the bright one was Thunder God;  
 the yellow one was Water Dragon;  
 the striped one was Tiger;  
 and the long one was Snake  
 ... (p. 120).

In the songs there is evidence of inventive reconstructions, transformations or new creations of old forms (Deal & Hostetler, 2006). The verses describe how some of the brothers' belly cords, morph into others. Dragon's belly cord changes into a soft-shelled turtle, Thunder God's changes into earth, Jang Vang's belly cord turned into rice, Tiger's turned into wild cats, brush wolves and foxes, and there is mention of Elephant's belly cord which changed into Dliang Ge Ghosts. The mention of a Water Dragon here is different from Strassberg's (2002) Winged-Dragon (Yinglong).

According to Bender (2006), Jang Vang is Elder Brother who plays a 'direct role in the creation of humankind' (p. xv). The story of Jang Vang (Mandarin speakers refer to Jang Vang as Jiangyang), is played out in *the great flood*, a song which describes how a dispute between Thunder God and Jang Van escalates into an inundation of water. The only survivors are Jang Vang and his sister who floated in a huge calabash. Recognising humanity was at risk, Jang Vang convinces his sister to marry him, and the result of their union is a misshapen ball of flesh. Vang is enraged, cuts the ball into nine pieces, and spreads the pieces over the earth. They change into vast numbers of people, who after another intervention with Thunder God, speak many languages and start a migratory search for a better life.

### ***Strange Chinese and Miao creatures***

Strassberg (2002) attributes the dissemination of knowledge about strange creatures among people in China as originating from a supreme god-king of antiquity such as the Yellow Thearch (Yellow Thaerch is referred to as The Huangdi or The Yellow Emperor in Mandarin, and referred to in places as the sun), or the shamans of early China. He tells us he has drawn on the 1809 standard edition of the *Guideways through mountains and seas* (Shanhajjing) by Hao Yixing, for his translation which includes original commentaries by Guo Pu. Guo Pu championed the book as an important aid in the intellectual and spiritual search of his age and is attributed as establishing what is essentially the final version between 310 and 324 C.E. Different to allegorical vehicles of theological virtues or evils, from the late medieval period in Europe, these strange creatures from China were regarded as actual entities found throughout the landscape. The creatures were viewed as part of the ecology within the cosmos of heaven and earth, as 'they dwelled elusively alongside humankind, who was obliged to learn how to recognize them and to employ the appropriate strategies for coexisting with them' (Strassberg, 2002, p. xiii).

It is helpful that a number of the wood-block illustrations in this text reproduced from a rare 1597 late Ming dynasty edition (illustrated by the artisan Jiang Yinghao) include depictions of some of the characters selected for the playing cards including the Winged Dragon (p. 211) and the intertwined Fuxi and his sister-wife Nüwa (p. 226). Also, in evidence are descriptions and images of shen-gods said to be a diverse group, living in specific places and functioning as nature deities or simply existing as individual anomalies. The Torch-Dragon is described as an example of shen-gods who are like 'cosmic embodiments who physically personify natural phenomena' (p. 48). Torch-Dragon is also called Torch-Darkness because it becomes night when he closes his eyes, and when he opens them daylight arrives, whilst his breathing denotes winter

and summer seasons. The ability to metamorphose is a characteristic of shen-gods, and for this reason, distinctions between them and lower creatures are not always clear. Strassberg (2002) says ‘both kinds may be classified as humans, beasts, birds, snakes, fish, animals with shells, or turtles’ (p. 49).

*Early ethnographic perspectives: Chinese Miao albums*

In the context of this particular pedagogical project, colonialism links imperial expansion and hegemony to creative representation, including cartography, travel writing and sketching (Rubiés & Ollé, 2016). Reassuringly, rather than portrayals of exotic others being simply a western phenomenon, there is emerging evidence of expanding empires in other parts of the early modern world tightening control over peripheral people through ethnographic interest (Deal & Hostetler, 2006; Rubiés & Ollé, 2016). During the eighteenth century China embarked on systematic ethnographic practises to compile taxonomies of ethnic minority groups. The ‘Miao albums’ refer to a genre of illustrated manuscripts (Miaoman tu or Bai Miao tu in Manadrin) which are attributed to a section in the *Illustrations of tributary peoples*, commissioned by the Qianlong emperor in 1751 (Deal & Hostetler, 2006). Deal and Hostetler say the albums may be distinguished as ‘ethnographic in their purported basis of direct observation’ (xx). However they argue that the depictions of Miao people in the albums may not have arisen independantly or be original, but were likely to have been influenced by earlier versions and prevalent subjectivities of the Chinese artists at the time. Rubiés and Ollé (2016) say the rhetoric of a true account may not be authentic, due to degrees of fictionalism and plagiarism being indulged (p. 263). Of note in Deal and Hostetler’s (2006) account is a reference to a Miao family name (surname). Deal and Hostetler say that the Hong (red) Miao can be identified by five family names, one of which is Long. Wu (2013) also discusses a village called Zalun in the Shanjiang district where approximately 200 Hmong-Mein Miao households have the surname Long. These two references are significant because they identify that Long Xiangpings role of cultural advisor, may be viewed as deeply informed by Miao tribal traditions.

*Contemporary use of cultural identity and artifacts: Chiyou’s buffalo horns*

Contemporary use of cultural identity and artifacts has become problematic for the Miao people in relationship to tourism (Campos, 2015). Two main issues have been identified, the first relates to tourism activities and the second relates to perceptions of international and domestic visitors.

Feng’s (2015) account of power relations between authorities appropriating public resources, transforming them into private properties to be monopolized by developers exclusively for profit, and peasants trying to practice informal tourism businesses in allocated spatial zoning in Fenghuang is likened to state-created crime. Disappointingly, the Shanjiang Miao Museum is implicated by Feng, with the owner a retired former vice head of the autonomous prefecture, and a board member of the Fenghuang Folk Culture and Custom Tourism Development Company. This leaves questions about the authenticity of the Miao artifacts that we had seen, and the way the ‘symbolic force of their material culture’ has been used to represent a form of ‘miaoicization’ (Campos, 2015).

Oakes (2000) argues a manipulation of cultural identity and artifacts for tourism purposes as not necessarily subversive, because ethnic pride and place-based identity may be preserved. However, Campos (2015) asserts that the A Hmu Miao version of Chiyou has grown to define Miao culture with inaccurate tourism advertising seen outside China's borders. In the search for a unified history, Chiyou is acknowledged as a common ancestor of Miao people, his buffalo horns are used extensively as a representative motif. Zhang (2016) refers to Chiyou as Txiv Yawg and says the Hmong diaspora now seek information on this legendary figure in order to identify with their culture. The use of Chiyou's horns is disputed due to historical evidence pointing to crossed buffalo horns originating from a few A Hmu subgroups from Southeast Guizhou, and only a few A Hmu women wearing silver buffalo horn ornaments (Campos, 2015). At first glance, it would be easy for an outsider to assume that the silver head-dresses worn by Miao women to be an embodiment of Chiyou ancestor worship. However, Long Xiangping explained to the author that although this worship is the most important during festivals, it is more complex than this. Cultural rituals associated with marriage, cattle and agricultural rhythms (Wu, 2013) are represented by the head-dresses, and distinctions in tribal identities are made through embossed motifs including dragons, the phoenix, the sun and flowers.

### **The playing card project**

The decision to use playing cards as the format to display the motifs was made by the educators. In order that the project avoid being viewed as representative of a form of imperialism, two reasons helped to rationalise the decision (Yang, 2014). Firstly, we had observed the ubiquitous nature of card playing in the rear of small tea shops, in and around the environs of Hunan City University in Yiyang, China. The cards were familiar, as they displayed the same suit and rank numbers as western playing cards. Secondly, there is evidence in the literature that playing cards originated from China (Lo, 2000). Conjecture about the origins of playing cards from early western sources first documented the appearance of cards in Germany and Spain in 1377, Italy in 1379, and France in 1392 (Bond, 1878; Carter, 1925). At the time of this conversation Carter (1925) correlated the advent of printing in China to produce dice in the form of cards to make 'sheet-dice' before the end of the Tang Dynasty (618 - 906), and during the Sung Dynasty (960 - 1280), a passage in the Liao annals attributes playing cards 'with almost entire certainty back to the year 969' (p. 140 - 141). Carter also mused on role of playing cards as print specimens in transmitting the Chinese invention of block printing from east to west in his book *The invention of printing in China and its spread westward*. Laufer (1927) critiqued Carter for his fondness of 'evolutionizing' in order to 'charm' on a number of points, including: the transition from dice to cards; and the history of games in providing evidence (p. 71). Nowadays, speculation on the influence of playing cards on the art of printing in the west, still awaits further discoveries, but it is generally agreed that China did introduce the world to playing cards (Lo, 2000).



*Pedagogical approach*

The pedagogical approach was based on a communication format of playing card design (Davis, 2016). This approach works on the assumption that an understanding of core principles and elements of design are applied in the design process and transferred between courses of study, for example from publication design to motion graphics. Design curriculum based on communication formats has been critiqued for its lack of scaffolding (Davis, 2016). Similarly, VCD courses which concentrate on formal and visual expressions of design such as design principles or typography, limits a learners' ability to 'develop a concern for substance over style' (Kim & Lee, 2016, p. 206). Therefore, design thinking, a strategic design process was adopted to underpin the project (Cross, 2011). Called a signature design pedagogy, design thinking responds to contemporary global and societal issues, and traverses professional and academic domains (Wilson & Zamberlan, 2017). The curriculum focussed on the ideate, prototype and evaluation phases of design thinking, which enabled an iterative process, and encouraged learners to consider and include the meaning of the story or character in their design work (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, 2013).

Prior to the project starting, knowledge gleaned from the literature and photographs taken at the Shanjiang Miao Museum were arranged into a card ranking that was loosely based on a perceived importance of the creature, for example the King card, perhaps could be Chiyou, the Queen card a phoenix, and the number two card a small flower *see Figure 1*.

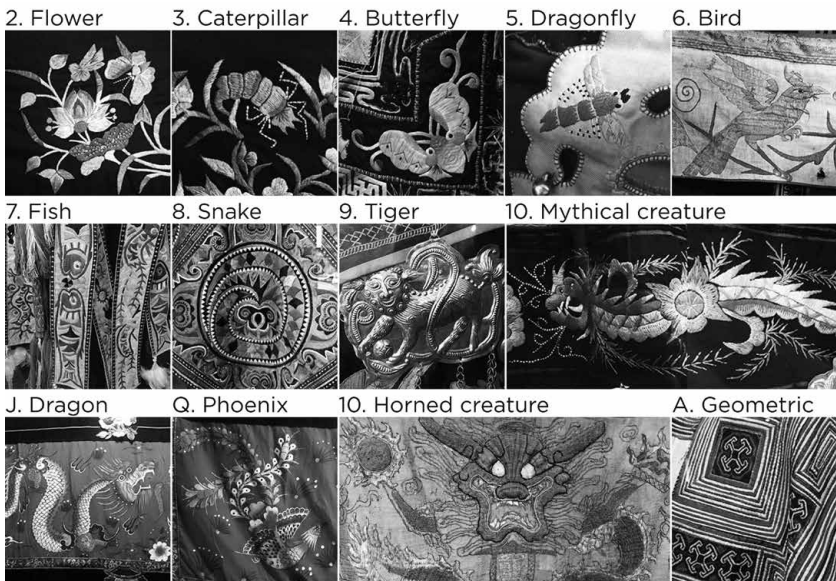


Figure 1: First card rank arrangement. (Source: Author images, Shanjiang Miao Museum).

This ranking was dismissed on the first morning of class as Long Xiangping had prepared a lecture called *The cultural connotations of Miao totem worship* by way of introduction to the project for the learners. The diversity of story and character depictions found in textiles and silver ornamentation augmented the photographs we had taken at the Shanjiang Miao Museum. 100 second year VCD learners attended the lecture, which was delivered in Mandarin with translators on hand to help try and unravel the content for the two New Zealand teachers. The term totem was used consistently throughout the presentation but I prefer to use motif according to semiotic traditions (Mollerup, 2004).

Consultation between Mr. Long and the teachers took place during the lunch break prior to classes starting in the afternoon, in order to better understand how the characters might be arranged into a hierarchy according to the importance of Miao traditions. Gods and people were considered to be the most important in the stories and therefore should take precedence over animals. Insects and flowers were unimportant but could be used for embellishment. A mystery was solved for the educators during this consultation. It had been difficult to interpret the prevalence of motifs which appeared to be mythical or oddly combined creatures. Long Xiangping referred to a file of numerous images that he has compiled over the years from museums and from his personal collection of textiles. He told us that when the tribes went into battle they wore an identifying motif. The tribe that won the battle would claim the other tribe's motif and combine the two into a new depiction, see *Figure 2*. Reflecting on this explanation, it seems that these juxtapositions may be viewed as a metaphor for a Miao form of colonization.

The 100 learners had been divided into four classes of 25, and the teachers each assigned two of the classes by a Chinese staff coordinator. To meet Chinese regulations, the delivery of this particular course required 48 hours of learner/teacher contact. Therefore, each of the educators taught the same project content twice, resulting in 96 hours of classroom teaching conducted within a three-week timeframe. A translator supported the teachers and learners in each class through the duration of the project. Together with the learners, and with recommendations from Mr. Long, the educators began the project with each class by assigning gods to the King, and Queen cards, a specific story to the Jack card, and a cast of animals to the rest of the numbered cards. The stars and the moon were assigned to the joker cards, a prominent card when



Figure 2: Combined tribal motifs (Source: Long Xiangping).

played in China. Although chaotic, a general consensus was reached on this hierarchical ordering by the learners consulting with each other in the classroom in person, and through WeChat, a social media application commonly used in China.

A game of snap was introduced to randomly allocate the learners into pairs to enable a sharing of concepts for one of the playing card characters. In the game, the first to snap a pair of cards wrote their name on the blackboard next to the corresponding card rank number *see Figure 3*. Each class created their own deck of cards, and since a deck of cards requires fourteen cards, three individual learners tackled one of the characters on their own. Learners began their creative design process by assembling reference images (making mood boards) of their designated characters to assist in the design thinking ideate (idea generation) phase of the process (Garner & McDonagh-Philp, 2001). The stories associated with the various gods and animals were told through the learning journey, and the learners encouraged to supplement knowledge gained from the lecture with continuous research.

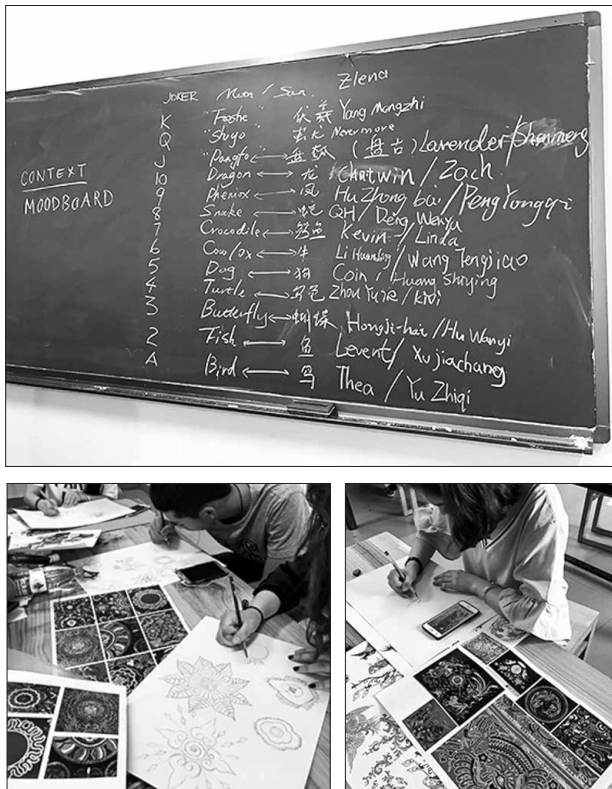


Figure 3: Allocating names to cards, and Chinese VCD learners using reference images to assist in the design thinking ideate (idea generation) phase (Source: Author images from VCD student work at HCU).

### *Interpreting Fuxi and Nüwa for the King card*

The King playing card depicted the intertwined Fuxi and Nüwa. According to Voth, Bailey & McClymond (2016), Fuxi is a mythical foundational figure who performed a series of powerful acts which established the basis of China's 5000-year-old mythological tradition. He is said to have carved a shared human culture by coaxing people down from the trees, teaching them to read, write and fend for themselves in the dangerous natural world. Long Xiangping's lecture established that the singular Fuxi figure is not a father of Miao, but that he is important because of his role in creation myth stories.

Strassberg (2002) attributes the origin of the intertwined depictions of Fuxi with his sister-wife Nüwa to a god from the south called Yanwei. Yanwei was thought to be identical to Wei-Snake, a demon god of a large lake who is as large as a wheel hub, as long as a carriage shaft and wears a purple robe and a vermillion hat. He detests sounds of thunder and of carriages, which cause him to stand up and raise his head(s). The Yanwei/Wei-Snake figure evolved into the Fuxi and Nüwa motif in Han painting and was the ancestral spirit of the Sprouts Tribe. The Sprouts people (Miaomin) were believed to be winged descendants of the Yellow Thearch who were banished to the distant south for rebelling against him (Strassberg, 2002, pp. 223-221).

The students who designed the Fuxi symbol for the King playing card used various intertwined depictions of Fuxi with his sister-wife Nüwa for inspiration, *see Figure 4*. In the serpent like manifestations of these mythical figures, Fuxi holds a setsquare, to rule the four-corned earth, and Nüwa holds a compass to rule the circling heavens. Strassberg (2000) attributes Fuxi and Nüwa's mathematical and astronomical instruments to the 'Umbrella-Heaven theory (or Gnomon of the Zhou dynasty theory)' that was traditionally credited to Fuxi. Associated with the Zhao dynasty period the theory suggests that the earth was square, convex and the highest point at the northern extremity was the center of both heaven and earth (p. 241).



Figure 4: Fuxi and Nüwa working drawings (Source: Author images from VCD student work at HCU).

### *Interpreting Chiyou for the Queen card*

Strassberg (2002) describes Chiyou as a challenger and a criminal with epic power struggles between the Yellow Tharch and Chiyou played out on earthly battlefields. During the Han dynasty, the divine Winged Dragon Yinglong (literally translated as Responding Dragon) is said to have attacked and killed Chiyou on the Yellow Tharch's orders at the Wu Liang shrine (Strassberg, 2002). Following his death the fetters from this god of war who invented weapons are said to have metamorphosed into a divine tree (Birrell, 1999).

Long Xiangping supplemented this story with descriptions of Chiyou and his role as a buffalo and bird totem clan leader. He had a copper head iron, and his fingers and toes held extraordinary ability. Student designs ranged from feminine to masculine which was a reflection of some confusion over the Queen playing card motif normally depicted as female, and the masculine Chiyou. Chiyou's horns were used by all the students, which is indicative of the commonly held view that horns are symbolic of the character. None of the students explored the idea of Chiyou being a cattle and bird totem clan leader.

### *Interpreting Panhu for the Jack card*

The legendary Panhu figure is a divine dog, worshipped by the Liuzhong Miao, Yaoren, and Lingjia Miao as part of their New Year's celebrations. In early written versions he is credited with fathering the population in the Land of the Dog People or the southern Man-Barbarian tribes with some southern minority tribes still claiming descent from him today (Deal & Hostetler, 2006; Pidhainy, 2008; Strassberg, 2002). Long Xiangping's lecture described the basic Panhu myth as a story about the emperor Gao Xin, who suffering from invasion offered to marry his daughter to anybody who could present him with the head of his enemy. The dragon-dog Panhu accomplished the task, and so the princess agreed to marry him. During their union the dragon-dog was transformed into a man and a child was born. Two learners juxtaposed a dog and a dragon to create a new motif as per the Miao tradition of combining motifs discussed earlier, and one of the students experimented with adding a baby into the arrangement, *see Figure 5*.

### *Designing motifs for the remainder of the cards*

It was decided by the students that a dragon would be suitable for the number ten playing card. This card signaled the first of the animals, mythical or otherwise assigned to an overall hierarchy. In Miao textile traditions, many of the symbols are zoomorphic (gods and humans represented in animal form), anthropomorphic (human characteristics applied to animals), phyllomorphic (decorative plant imitation) or geometric (Corrigan, 2001). As a consequence of being mythical, the dragon may be depicted in many different ways. The body may comprise of snake-like attributes, and a deer, pig or head of cattle may be represented. It might be like a crocodile, a turtle, it might sparkle like fish, shrimp, or fly like a bird. These descriptions, and a beautiful expression from the Long Xiangping's lecture also described the dragon as rain in the heaven of lightning. This expression is supported by descriptions and an illustrated depiction of Winged-Dragon (Yinglong) in Strassberg (2002). This creature is strongly associated with Chiyou and the weather. Strassberg, tells us Winged-Dragon lived

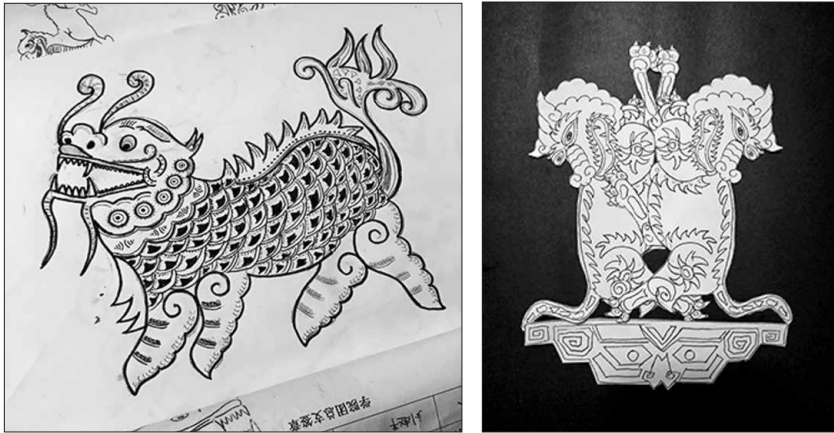


Figure 5: Learner working drawings for the Panhu card (Source: Author images from VCD student work at HCU).

on the southern edge of Mount Fierce in the east of the great wilds. He accumulated water, but when the Yellow Thearch ordered Winged-Dragon to kill Chiyou, Chiyou asked the gods of wind and rain to unleash a great storm. The Thearch sent his divine daughter named Ba (Drought-Fury) to stop the storm. Once Chiyou was killed, Ba was unable to ascend back to heaven. From then until this day, there is no rain wherever she dwells. People are said to make images of Winged-Dragon when there is no rain (Strassberg, 2002).

In descending order, the Fenghuang-bird (phoenix), snake, crocodile, ox, dog, turtle, butterfly, fish, bird, were designated as the motifs to follow the number ten Winged-Dragon card, and the sun and moons used for the joker card. *Figure 6* presents a selection of completed designs.

Fenghuang-bird's origins have been traced by some modern scholars to the ostrich, eagle, pheasant, or peacock, but its depiction has varied over the centuries (Strassberg, 2002). Strassberg tells us Fenghuang-birds always carry shields; they tread on and wear snakes on their breasts, and that the representation in his book is unusual because the bird is represented with a spear. In other times Fenghuang-bird has been invoked to represent political harmony, a symbol of Confucian values, an omen of world peace, it is found in paradise where people consume their eggs, has become increasingly flamboyant, and more latterly paired with the Luan-bird or dragon as an imperial symbol and a popular decorative motif denoting yin-yang conjugal harmony (Strassberg, 2002, p. 194).

It seemed unusual to the teachers that the butterfly had been relegated down the rank to the number three card, especially as the butterfly mother is pivotal to Miao mythology according to English texts (Bender, 2006). Having been told by Long Xiangping that Miao households in Xiangxi are patriarchal, described by Feng (2015) as patrilineal



Figure 6: A selection of final designs for the playing cards: (Source: Author images from VCD student work at Hunan City University).

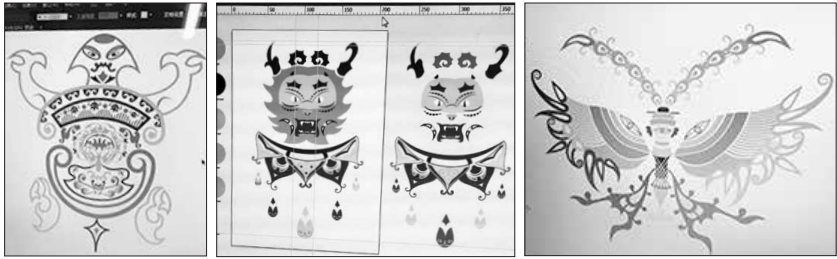


Figure 7: Anthropomorphic characteristics (Source: Author images from VCD student work at HCU).

and patrilocal, we assumed this might be the reason, however, a simple explanation for the apparent low rank of the butterfly is located in Wu (2013). Wu says that at the ceremonial stage of a conventional Miao wedding ritual, new couples stay with bride's parental families for three days because three is a lucky number for the Miao.

In conclusion, all of the playing cards were designated to use specific characters by the learners and the two New Zealand educators except the Jack card, which was selected to convey the Panhu story. As exemplified in *Figure 6*, hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades were sometimes used in the designs by way of a type of decorative exchange. For example, the number four turtle card has a heart shape embedded in its shell, and the butterfly next to it has three spades balanced on its feelers, a nice nod to three being a lucky number according to Miao traditions. Arguably the King and Queen cards were designed by using zoomorphic representations, however very few learners chose to decorate their characters with plants. The number three butterfly mother card shown here is one of the few examples where the learner chose to incorporate phyllomorphic characteristics. A number of learners applied human characteristics to animals in an anthropomorphic fashion *see figure 7*. Two eyes and/or a mouth were generally favoured, however one learner took this concept a step further. Her butterfly design featured a central eye on the head, and two eyes were positioned at the top of the wings.

## Conclusion

This article offers a perspective on how design educators may navigate sensitivities when crossing cultural boundaries in China. Initially, much of the learning about the Miao stories and characters used for this pedagogical playing card project was augmented by the literature due to detail being lost in verbal and written translations. I used internet generated translation tools to decipher written material obtained from HCU, and had it checked by translators in Hunan. Although limited, the pieces to the stories gradually fell into place. Some serendipitous discoveries were made, for example there is reference to playing cards in the song *Creating the Suns and Moons*. 'When they were made, the entire sky would brighten. People would be able to play



cards in their spare time, and scholars could review their lessons' (Bender, 2006, p. 51). Bender (2006) and Strassberg (2002) are two texts that were used extensively during the project as they contained verbal descriptions and visual depictions of some of the stories and creatures used by the learners for the playing card designs.

The risks of using cultural icons, the colonial stereotypes and the use of western pedagogy in in this particular transnational context was mitigated to a certain extent in a number of ways. Firstly, the challenges of using of cultural icons for student work was offset by an awareness of the critiques made in the literature. Some of the highlighted issues associated wrongful interpretations of ancestor worship in the contemporary use of cultural identity and artefacts by Miao people themselves (Campos, 2015). It was disappointing to discover that the Shanjiang Miao Museum which we had visited to gather reference material was implicated in Feng's (2015) account of power relations in tourism. This led to a careful questioning by the educators about the authenticity of reference material used by the learners. It was important to ensure their completed motif designs were not representative of a material culture which added to a form 'miaoicization' and thus potentially perpetrate cultural icon stereotypes (Campos, 2015; Young & Haley, 2009). Secondly, balancing colonial stereotypes and introduced western pedagogy was managed by the collaborative nature of working between Long Xiangping, the translators and the educators (Yang, 2014). An emergence of mutual interest and openness to learn from each other took place. Long Xiangping was keen to learn about the pedagogical intent and the design educators inspired to learn about Miao culture. Many of the VCD students at HCU are Han, so their grasp of some of the Miao stories were limited. Having a cultural advisor on hand was not only an invaluable resource for the learners but also for the educators. During the learning process, content had to be re-thought and re-defined, stories were told over and over again, and new visual resources were found. The ambiguous nature of design pedagogies within internationalization was helped in part by the inclusion of three design thinking phases: ideate, prototype, and test (evaluate). In our opinion this simply framed pedagogical approach with its inherent iterative process enabled an emerging acceptance of ideas that arose from a different cultural backgrounds through the duration of the project (Caldwell & Gregory, 2016; Ryan & Louie, 2007).

Taking a longer-term view of benefits associated with co-creational projects such as this, is to acknowledge the role educators play in contributing small steps towards sustained working relationships, and other transnational opportunities for New Zealand education (de Klerk, 2015). 'Partnerships and relationships are the core of China's expectations of transnational higher education' (Doyle, 2016, p. 26).

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### Biographical Note

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