International project report
Jingdezhen, China
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International research trip
For my international research trip, I took a trip to Jingdezhen, China from early May to mid June. During my 6 wk long trip, I conducted interviews with traditional artisans and created a sculpture with a master sculptor.

Ideas behind the project
Although the concept of tradition is the notion of holding on to a previous time, tradition changes slowly. Often times, those who carry out the traditions are not particularly aware of the change. Even when a tradition undergoes major changes over time, people seldom notice it. Traditions take many forms such as artistic heritage, belief, and customs. I am interested in exploring how tradition undergoes changes and finding ways to introduce a change into a tradition. At the moment, I am especially interested in transformation which occur in the tradition of religious sculpture making. The elements that trigger transformations often reflect historical, cultural and technological changes in the world.

Migration of Buddha sculpture-making is a great example that illustrates the transformation of tradition. When the Buddhism began in northern India and spread to East Asia, Buddhist sculptures went through transformations. As the practice of Buddhist sculpture-making crossed borders and regions toward East Asia, initial India influenced features transformed more and more.

External influences play a significant role in transformation of the tradition. As an artist, I am interested in introducing my artistic influence to the making of “traditional” Buddha sculpture. By introducing aesthetic elements of anime to the traditional Buddha sculpture, I intend to play a role in transforming the tradition of Buddhist sculptures.

Transformation of Buddha from India to Japan
(From left to right: Indian Buddha sculpture, Tibetan Buddha sculpture, Chinese Buddha sculpture, Korean Buddha sculpture, Japanese Buddha sculpture)
Why China?
I was interested in China as a destination for my research trip for many reasons. China’s complex history with tradition in relatively recent past intrigued me. For example, the Cultural revolution in China banned the four olds; old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. From 1966 to 1976, production of traditional objects was banned. I wanted to find out about the impact of such historical events on the practice of tradition. I became interested in how the traditional artists dealt with such a cultural catastrophe.
I looked into some of the traditional objects which Mao’s regime banned. They were mostly old Buddhist and Taoist sculptures. I researched where they were made. My curiosity led me to a city called Jingdezhen. Artisans in Jingdezhen have produced ceramic products for the Emperors in various Chinese dynasties including Ming, Yuan, Qing and many others. Jingdezhen products were considered to be treasures by many Western cultures. In addition to ceramic products, Jingdezhen is famous for religious sculptures. Jingdezhen sculptors have created Buddhist or Taoist sculptures for centuries. After the communist revolution, sculptors focused on making revolutionary propaganda sculptures for the communist party. Jingdezhen’s complex history with producing traditional objects
Investigation
During my stay in Jingdezhen for six weeks, I conducted interviews with local artists who experienced the Cultural revolution to find out the impact of the government ban on the old objects. Some of the questions I investigated include; What does it mean for a traditional practice to stop all of a sudden? Did the cultural revolution force the artists to transform the traditional practices of art making? How did the knowledge about the traditional methods survive the revolution?

Collaboration
My ambition for this project was bigger than doing a field research. One of my major plans for this trip was to create a “new” traditional sculpture by infusing a new aesthetic into the traditional sculpture form. I interviewed many traditional sculptors and chose to work with a traditional sculptor from Dehua tradition. Although he comes from Dehua tradition, he also mastered Jingdezhen sculpture style as well. His mastery over different traditions of Chinese sculptures made him an ideal person to work with because he wasn’t stuck in one tradition. He was willing to create hybrid forms. He received his training from working with a traditional master sculptor who comes from a long lineage of master sculptors. I brought him a sketch for the sculpture I wanted to create. The process of injecting new elements to the traditional sculpture involved numerous conversations and negotiations with the sculptor.
Use of anime aesthetic
I use anime aesthetic in my creative practice for multiple reasons. One of the main reasons why I chose anime aesthetic for this research project was because of its quality as a transnational language. Although anime as an art form was heavily influenced by Disney in its early stage, anime as a visual language has transformed itself into something much more than its western counterpart. Due to the popularity of Anime, facial features of Western animation characters such as Disney characters have changed. Anime as a form represents a transnational exchange of dialogues between the East and the West.
Anime also reflects the psychological state of modern men. Big eyes, small nose and unrealistic proportions of anime characters reflect the unrealistic perception of the reality by contemporary men.
I chose to infuse anime aesthetic into the traditional Buddhist sculpture form because of anime’s transformative, transnational and reflective characteristics as a visual language.

Thesis project and international research
I am grateful to the Stamps School of Art and Design for providing me with the opportunity to conduct international research in Jingdezhen. I have created enough network for me to go back to Jingdezhen in the future and continue my research. The sculpture I created during my stay in Jingdezhen will be an important part of my thesis exhibition. The sculpture which I created with a local master sculptor embodies the idea of transformation of tradition as well as remix or remake culture. Since those elements will be major thematic components for the thesis, I am very satisfied with the result of the research trip. Since the sculpture is not in a finished stage, I would prefer not to present the image of finished sculpture in this report.

In addition to my research trip report, I wrote down some words of advice about working or traveling in Jingdezhen. They are as follows:

Workshop
Many people recommended Jingdezhen pottery workshop to me. Pottery workshop is a residency, which offers translation service, lodging and work space. Although it offers some great benefits for first time visitors, the artist residency often insulates the artists from the real
local artisans and infrastructures. There are many ways to navigate the city without having to rely on the workshop. I found out that one of the best options for lodging is youth hostel. They are clean and reasonably priced. Their staffs speak English. It isn’t difficult to hire a translator in order to communicate with the artisans. Renting studio is also possible through translator. In addition to the pottery workshop, there is a residency called Sanbao, which exposes resident artists to more traditional way of making ceramic work.

Tea culture
Drinking tea with locals is a great way to make friends. Drinking coffee makes one seem less sophisticated in Jingdezhen. So I highly recommend anyone interested in Jingdezhen to start enjoying tea. There are proper tea drinking etiquettes and the locals will be more than happy to share their knowledge. One can also tell how they regard you by the quality of tea they serve.

Summer
Summer in Jingdezhen gets hot and humid. It rains a lot during Summer, which can be problematic when it comes to drying clay work.

Air
The air in Jingdezhen has a lot of dust. If you have a respiratory issue, be aware.

Food
Jingdezhen is famous for its lunfun dish (means cold noodle). Lunfun is actually not cold. It is served warm. Around the royal kiln site, they have several great Lunfun places. If you like sweet dessert, Tangyuen is a good dish to try. It is a sweet rice cake, submerged in sweet water.

Language
Some young college students speak English. It is extremely difficult to find English speakers among general population. Make sure to write down basic sentences and names of locations on a piece of paper. It helps with communicating with taxi drivers and restaurant staffs.

Transportation
Taxi is the best way of getting around in town. If you are not with a Chinese friend, discuss the price with the driver before getting into the taxi. Taxi drivers usually do not give passengers any receipts to avoid tax.