

Exploring Asian Art and Visual Culture in the Community

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Abstract

Both the ubiquity of Asian art and visual culture in most U. S. communities and my Asian immigrant background has motivated me to explore and seek ways to embrace teaching popular Asian images and objects we come across in many U. S. communities. To address this educational concern, I explore three approaches, which can serve as a useful guide to studying and teaching popular Asian images and objects in the art classroom. The three approaches set forth by Mitchell (historical/folkloric, functional/contextual, and critical), may be useful for students engaging in multicultural community-based research projects or gaining an intercultural experience to understand and appreciate Asian art and visual culture in their neighborhood and community.

Keywords: Asian art, visual culture, community-based research, historic/folkloric, functional/contextual, and critical approach

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Recently Asia has received more attention than ever in terms of its economy, politics, culture, sports, and important role in globalization (Rowen, Hancock, & Miller, 2006; Pink, 2006). At the 2007 New York National Art Education Convention, Daniel Pink reminded art educators of the significance of Asia and its emerging economic power in the areas of technology, networking, and engineering. As an example, in 2008 China spent 42 billion dollars on the grandest and most expensive opening and closing ceremonies in Olympic history—demonstrating that it is a rising economic and political power (Yardley, 2008). The Olympic Games established China as a rising star and through the use of the games, effectively promoted the spread of Chinese national identity and cultural heritage internationally. Previous Asian hosts of the Olympic Games, such as Tokyo, Japan, in 1964, and Seoul, Korea, in 1988 also used the games to promote their rising economic might (Brownell, 1995; Collins, 2008).

The impact of Asian culture is not new in America (Kelts, 2007;

Lent, 1995). One can notice, for example, the ubiquity of popular Asian images and objects in many forms, such as arts and crafts, travel souvenirs, electronics, mass media communications, sports, and well-recognized brand names like Honda, LG, Nintendo, Samsung, Sony, and Toshiba. It is also commonly recognized that many products in retail stores have been made in China or other Asian countries. Since the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, an unprecedented number of Asians have been admitted to the U. S., and this has resulted in a large increase in the Asian-American population. According to the 2004 *Statistical Abstract* of the U.S., between 1971 and 2002, 7.3 million of the total 18 million immigrants were born in Asia (Le, 2008). The historically high naturalization rate of Asian immigrants has subsequently shifted the regional origin of new citizens from Europe to Asia (Rytina & Caldera, 2008). Asian immigrants have become our neighbors and community members, often creating strong ethnic enclaves (Le, 2008) or diasporic communities (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

Many of them continue to practice their traditional arts and maintain cultural practices, keeping their cultural and ethnic value systems and morals alive within the North American context (Hart, 1991).

I, myself, am an Asian immigrant. My background as an Asian immigrant and minority group member, living in America has motivated me to explore and seek ways to embrace teaching Asian visuals and objects we come across in many communities. Considering the ubiquity of Asian art and visual culture, my main objective in this article is to explore three approaches to understanding Asian objects, which may serve as a useful guide to studying and teaching Asian art and visual culture. These approaches result from my own observation and self-examination, what Nash (2004) refers to as “scholarly personal narratives” (p. 23), and are the result of prolonged reflection upon intercultural insights gained while living in two cultural spaces, as “a privileged observer” (Ulbricht, 2007, p. 61).

Three Approaches to Explore Popular Asian Images and Culture

In my approach to explore Asian art and visual culture, I have adopted and applied the critical perspective of W. J. T. Mitchell, who argued

for the eclectic and unsystematic nature of methodology (Dikovitskaya, 2005). Mitchell is skeptical that a strictly social sciences-based methodology is applicable to any and all kinds of analysis and interpretation of visual cultural sites. The approaches (historical/folkloric, functional/contextual, and critical) are multidisciplinary and qualitative in nature, and as such are intended to be more broadly applicable than any one historical-cultural method. His methods allow for a deeper understanding of art and visuals in the community. They can be applied to the high school art classroom to introduce and explore popular Asian images and objects. These objects, in my opinion, shed light on the most significant and unique characteristics of Asian art and visual culture within U. S. settings, providing useful research and teaching strategies for art teachers and students described below.

Historic/Folkloric Approach

The historical/folkloric approach is critical to the study and explication of an Asian object or image. Its primary function is to identify a given aspect of a visual artifact and to study it in its own historical and folkloric context, as an object or image produced at a specific time and place in history. In

so doing, one seeks “to examine in depth the relation of the artifact to aspects of its own culture” (Fleming, 1982, p. 169). Many Asian visuals and objects are about particular historic events or figures and also incorporate aspects of myth and allegory as essential means of conveying basic truths and folk beliefs that transcend ordinary time and space (i.e., historical) relationships and understandings. They associate with the folk life and beliefs of people who use, display, and perform with them (Congdon, 2004).

To study an Asian object, the teacher and students, first, will identify an image or object among a range of available Asian cultural objects within their community. Places students can find them include Asian restaurants, markets, festival sites, cultural centers, workplace or offices displaying travel souvenirs, and even television programs and movies that feature Asian culture. It is advised that the teacher survey places within their community and develop a list of venues where images or objects are easily accessible. Students can also share their acquaintance and encounters with some popular images and figures through those venues, such as dragons and phoenix, maneki neko (lucky cat), daruma dolls, and Ful/Luk/Sau (three gods) themes, as

well as other unknown historical, religious or folk images used for decoration on clothing, fans, furniture, adornments, and various household objects. After identifying an object or image students will conduct research to gain an understanding of historical and folk knowledge by focusing on artistic form, materials, ethnic origin, and historical facts, myths, and folklore. They may research books, search the World Wide Web, or visit ethnic cultural centers, and are also encouraged to interview people who own and display the objects. Below is an example of community-based art research of a popular Asian theme called *Nine Fish*.

Asian restaurants and immigrant houses in America commonly display Asian paintings and crafts. Some of the most common images found in Asian communities in the United States are paintings of Nine Fish. I came across artworks of Nine Fish in several Asian restaurants, stores, on-line markets, and an Asian immigrant’s house (Figure 1).

There are two very interesting encounters with Nine Fish paintings that surprised and led me to explore them further. The first case took place in Tucson, Arizona, in 2007, when I visited a Korean-American woman married to a Japanese American computer scientist. The painting hung on



Figure 1. *Nine Fish*. A painting displayed at the house of Asian Immigrant Couple. Tucson, Arizona, 2007.

her living room wall. Her husband shared with me that he purchased it on e-Bay, adding that he wished to have a fish painting because it not only represented prosperity and wealth, but it was also a symbol of his and his wife's culture. A few months later, I found two more Nine Fish paintings within a Girl Scout shop. It fascinated me to see a whole display wall decorated with Chinese artifacts as part of the Girl Scout's "World Thinking Day," which is intended to help people think of being scouts and girl-guides around the world. The exhibited objects were typical Chinese cultural objects, including traditional dresses, fans, Chinese to-go boxes, paper dragons, toys, figurines, lanterns, chopsticks, and

baskets. Among these objects was a Nine Fish design on a hanging scroll (see Figure 2); and another Nine Fish painting was displayed in the shop's staff office (See Figure 3).

My inquiry of the ownership and contribution of these images and objects in this unlikely space led me to meet with a Chinese American woman working in the shop who owned them. She discussed that many of the images belonged to her Chinese immigrant mother, and offered an explanation of the meaning of the Nine Fish theme. Relying on her folk knowledge gained from her mother, she said that eating fish in a bowl is a very old and important custom for New Year's Day in China because this is an expression of hope for enough food throughout the year on the table. Fish in a bowl is a symbol of a resource that never dries up, standing for prosperity and abundance, and Nine Fish paintings are the visual representation of their cultural and artistic expression of these ideas.

Next, I decided to see if I could find out more specific meanings of the fish images and explain why people buy and display them. My initial search effort using Google Scholar and other scholarly search engines failed due to the lack of writings and publications on Asian

folk paintings and related customs. So I performed a Google Web search for any clue, using several key words, specifically “Asian fish painting” or “Chinese fish painting.” From one of the sites I first learned that people called this kind of painting Nine Fish. The search identified many commercial web sites that promoted and sold Nine Fish paintings. One of them offered some information concerning why Nine Fish means prosperity and wealth. According to the website, the pronunciation of “fish” is the same as that for “abundance” (“left-over”) in Chinese characters. The pronunciation of “nine” in Chinese characters is the same as that of the phrase “everlasting.” Thus the combination “nine fish” creates a new symbolic meaning, the hope for unceasing wealth and abundance (see Figure 4).

This is one of popular ways to interpret images and objects within Chinese, Japanese, and Korean paintings. Cho (1989), a Korean scholar who did an extensive iconographic study of Asian symbols, called this interpretation method “homophonic analogy.” That is, artists and viewers established a communal agreement to understand plants, animals, and everyday objects in paintings through the use of homophones. This in-



Figure 2. *Nine Fish in a Hanging Scroll*. Girl Scout Shop, Tucson, Arizona, 2008

dicates that most plants, animals, flowers, fruits, as well as non-living objects require the application of homophonic interpretation.

Cho (1989), a Korean scholar who has undertaken extensive study in understanding Asian paintings, provided another shared interpretation of Nine Fish paintings among aristocratic classes in East Asia, where they are knowledgeable on Chinese classics.



Figure 3. *Nine Fish*. Girl Scout Shop, Tucson, Arizona, 2008

He claims that the painting of Nine Fish is a visual rendering of the poem by Chunbo within Shi Jin, which is the oldest collection of Chinese poems edited by Confucius (551-479 BCE). Here, the nine stands for the literal number nine, while fish have the pronunciation as “similarity” or “likeness” (see Figure 5a) in Chinese characters. The painting thereby expresses the wish to have blessings like the nine objects listed in the following popular poem:

*The blessings from the heavens are,
 like a high mountain,
 like a big field,
 like a big ride,
 like a big hill,
 like a living river,
 like the bright moon,
 like the rising sun,
 like the everlasting South Mountain,*

*like the density of a pine tree
 never coming to an end.*

[Translation in English by the author]

In these kind of paintings a popular East Asian phrase, Nian Nian You Yu (see Figure 5b) is often inserted into the structure of the work. This literally expresses a wish to have every year be blessed with abundance in life (www.orientaloutpost.com). The phrase appears on chopsticks available at many local Asian restaurants (See Figure 6). On this chopstick sleeve, this phrase and a fish image are intended as a reminder of Nine Fish.

As shown in this example, the primary aim of the historical/folkloric approach is to identify the ethnic and cultural origin of an image or object, and its symbols and visual characteristics under its authentic and historical context,

九 (NINE): 久 (EVERLASTING)

魚 (Fish): 餘 (LEFTOVER, ABUNDANCE)

Figure 4. *The combination “nine fish” creates a new symbolic meaning, the hope for unceasing wealth and abundance.*

如 (SIMILARITY OR LIKENESS)

年年有餘 (NIAN NIAN YOU YU)

Figures 5a & 5b. *The painting’s Chinese characters expresses the wish to have every year blessed with abundance in live.*

and to increase students’ own cultural knowledge of the art and culture of others (Bowman, 2006; Congdon, 2004; Hammer, 2000). Conducting research about cultural practices, customs, legends, dances, music, customs, and folk beliefs, they develop an understanding of a group of people and their lives within their community (Bartis, 2002).

Through the historic/folkloric approach, students are invited to understand how an ethnic group expresses ideas, belief systems, morals, values, traditions, practices, and customs mediated by visuals and material objects. This helps one to pay attention to the unnoticed or invisible spheres of their life. I have observed that many Asian cultural events or customs are celebrated within a distinct ethnic group and, therefore, are not accessible or known to many non-Asians. Even though there are

many cultural resources available, they have not been widely shared among other groups of people. It may ask us to look after and care for what Hamer (2000) calls “everyday artistic expressions” and “the arts—verbal, material, customary, and so on—produced and encountered in their everyday lives” (p. 56). We can learn from people we meet in our everyday context as “indigenous teachers” by paying attention to what they can teach us about their culture and folklore.

Functional/Contextual Approach

In this approach students are encouraged to explore functional and contextual aspects of an object, either simultaneously or after completing historical/folkloric research. Consider that Asian people who immigrate to the U. S. move with, import, or make and sell their ethnic and cultural objects and images, some



Figure 6. *Chopstick Sleeve. A Vietnam Restaurant. Tucson, Arizona*

of which are also brought in by traveling Americans, industrial trades, and the entertainment business as well as seen through popular media. As Nicolas Thomas (1991), an anthropologist and historian, has claimed, “What we are confronted with is never more or less than a succession of uses and recontextualizations” (cited in Rose, 2007, p. 223). Some questions that can address and highlight the functional/contextual approach are as follows: Why were they made, or for what purpose? What functions do they serve in their new contexts? Who owns them now and why? What does this mean to owners and the Asian community? These questions could be explored in student research and shared through class presentations and discussions. Students would learn that meanings of an object should not be seen as fixed to its original culture, but rather as fluid under different social and contextual contexts.

Exploring Asian objects with this functional/contextual approach can

help students compare and contrast an object under two different contexts - the newly relocated context and its original cultural context. Students soon will realize that many Asian objects once devoted to religious ceremonies, such as crafts, vessels, statues, and amulets, have lost their original cultural or religious meaning or spirituality because they have become secularized or decorative objects in new U. S. homes, offices, and restaurants. For this matter the *Laughing Buddha* is an excellent example (see Figure 7) to showcase the adoption of the object to a new setting, the immigrant Asian’s life, assigned with new meanings and functions (See Shin, 2010, for further historical/folkloric information about this popular figure). Even though some Asians might still exercise folk beliefs, such as bringing good fortune to the household or workplace. The most commonly display image, such as the *Laughing Buddha*, are used in household or placed in Asian restaurants, markets, or on ethnic store countertops as decorations. This in-

dicates that the Buddha images are typically produced for immigrant consumers and that their display in ethnic markets can be used to sooth the yearnings and feelings of nostalgia for life in one's distant homeland as well as expressing their ethnic and cultural identity.

Most Asian popular images and cultural objects seen within U. S. communities are not what we see in art museums or in other historical texts, even though they are loaded with cultural meanings and significance regarding Asian everyday life. This may trigger many discussion questions about their na-

ture and value as an artwork. Some discussion questions the teacher can pose are: Are they authentic cultural art forms if they are made for ethnic markets or tourists? Who decides? How do their functions (social, cultural, and religious) play a role in appreciating them? Symbols and icons appear in various formats and surfaces such as hanging scrolls, vases, rice paper, furniture, clothing, and quilts and upholstery. Why is it important to appreciate them with the cultural knowledge of the object? Why or why not is it significant to have them in the U. S. community? If anyone recre-



Figure 7. *Laughing Buddha. Chinese restaurant, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2007.*

ates (copies) a Nine Fish painting on canvas and exhibits it in a gallery, is this more valuable than the original? (One of my students painted the Nine Fish theme, and displayed it in a university gallery.) Does the fact that most Asian images and objects are mass-produced and sold make them less valued or worthy? These questions are good class discussion starters for students who find Asian objects. Students can even be invited to write an essay to further explore the interaction and intersection of art, culture, and objects in the globalization era.

Critical Approach

The “critical approach” has to do with exploring images and objects through the concept of social and cultural contact zones. Pratt’s (1991) concept, “the contact zone,” is very useful in understanding and analyzing an ethnic object that serves as a door to understanding a different culture and exploring how students get familiar with other culture. According to Pratt, it refers to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). Even though she introduced the

term within the context of describing such examples of literary arts as autoethnography and transculturation, any Asian objects and images could become useful and serve as the potential contact zone through which students are exposed to Asians and their culture. So the critical approach examines an object through this concept, looking at the intersection and interaction between different cultures.

Through being involved with the two approaches described previously, students can start to build a cultural contact zone to Asian culture. They are exposed to ideas, histories, knowledge, interests, and attitudes about an object and their researched (other) group. The role of the art teacher is to make his or her students’ research meaningful to them in learning about the studied cultural group. They can help students perform critical self-reflections of their research process and results. The students can ruminate on their own initial responses and changes of viewpoints through the course of their research. For example, their aesthetic, social, and emotional responses and gained knowledge can be analyzed and compared with the students’ own cultural objects and their meanings and values. Thus,

students become engaged in comparative cultural understanding through examining the common functions of art objects (Chalmers, 1996). When all the students in the class share their research, they learn various examples from their own and other cultural origins.

Another important example of the contact zone students are dealing with is Asian popular cultural imagery to which students are exposed through mass media and popular culture.

Indiscreet appropriation, misrepresentation, and bias or stereotypes towards other cultures are some of the main concerns when exploring the contact zone delivered by popular culture or capitalism.

Advertisements, movies, flyers, and product designs are some main objects for students to discuss. A good example to address the awareness of cultural sensitivity is Victoria's Secret's printed image of a sacred Buddha in one of their swimwear designs (see Author's Note). Obviously, this was seen as an insult to devout Buddhists, and Victoria's Secret was criticized for exemplifying Western capitalism's insensitiv-

ity to the cultural values of others (Henderson, 2007). In this case, there was little or no respect for the value of the culture and religion throughout the product development process, and this subsequently led to the exploitation of a cherished religious image. Likewise, the use and consumption of images and statues of the Buddha in the U. S., such as Buddha bars, which ignore the intended purpose of meditation or religious practice, are commonly subject to criticism among practicing Buddhists.

Some discussion topics to provoke students' investigation with these issues include: Who produced it and why? Who uses or consumes it? What does it encourage you to think and feel? What culture, ethnic group, or nationality does it represent? What does the ethnic group from which it originated say about the object? What kind of information does it present? Is the use of this image morally responsible or correct? If not, what can we do about it? Does the information conflict with something you already know or that of another source? These questions help address some critical issues when Asians or any minority ethnic groups are concerned about the adoption and appropriation of their cultural symbols and icons.

Conclusions

In this article I pointed out the ubiquity of Asian visual culture in U. S. communities, and then I suggested that we explore Asian visuals and material objects employing three distinctive approaches, each of which acknowledges the multi-disciplinary nature of the imagery itself. The historical/folkloric approach involves examining figures, objects, symbols, and characteristics of an image or object in their authentic and historical context; the functional/contextual approach examines the adopted and assigned meanings and roles of the object within U. S. contexts distant from its own native context; and the critical approach investigates the object through the concept of the contact zone, delving into how the object serves as a medium to understand cultural interaction and appropriation by self-reflective examination of the appropriations, stereotypes, and any misunderstanding of the imagery by individuals from another cultures. These three approaches might not exhaust all possible viewpoints in understanding Asian art and visual culture in the U. S. community. However, they can guide the art teacher and students to look at and analyze cultural objects that have been resituated and integrated into the U. S. context and,

in so doing, contribute to extended study of ethnic objects and images of other non-Western or indigenous cultural and ethnic groups.

Author's Note: The Sri Lankan government sent an official letter of protest to the company, and Victoria's Secret halted the sale of the swimming suit with an apology.

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