

Remapping the Creativity of Popular Visual Culture: A Perspective on the Asian Ethnic Group

Chung Yim Lau
Assistant Professor
Hong Kong Institute of Education
E-mail: chungyim@ied.edu.hk

Abstract

Creativity has always been one of the most discussed topics in Western art education. Today, young people are surrounded by a wide variety of new technology and are familiar and comfortable with the use of this technology. They are able to use various types of visual media to demonstrate and express their creative ideas through popular cultural organizations such as cosplay and dōjinshi, and to share and communicate these ideas through global networking and a variety of media such as YouTube, Facebook and MSN. However, does this type of creativity precisely reflect the situation in the contemporary visual culture of Asian ethnic groups? Furthermore, can our existing theories of creativity explicate the cultural phenomena appearing in Asia today? In order to answer these questions, in this article I will discuss various theories and definitions of creativity and highlight some significant related issues. I will also present some of the findings from my recent study on Asian ethnic group creativity as examples of the creative phenomena currently appearing in the region.

Key Words: Asian Ethnic Groups, Creativity, Macro and Micro Perspectives, Visual Culture

Creativity has always been one of the most discussed topics in Western art education. The nature of creativity is diverse. Although the contemporary definition of creativity remains vague and there is no consensus on its meaning (Sternberg, 2007), we can find a variety of theories on creativity by reviewing the history of art education. In art education, the main discussion related to the topic reflects the shift in the mainstream paradigm and the change in the philosophical underpinning of art education. One significant example is the paradigm shift from Discipline-based Art Education to a visual culture curriculum which takes into account and reflects the everyday cultural experiences of young people. One of the assumptions behind this paradigm shift, moving the emphasis from modern art to contemporary art and the media of popular culture, is that it will give young people another means of communicating with their peers in their everyday lives. This tremendous change will undoubtedly reshape our understanding of creativity in the contemporary context.

Today, young people are surrounded by a wide variety of new technology and are familiar and comfortable with the use of this technology. They are able to use various types of visual media to demonstrate and express their creative ideas through popular cultural organizations such as cosplay and dōjinshi, and to share and communicate these ideas through global networking and a variety of media such as YouTube, Facebook and MSN. However, does this type of creativity precisely reflect the situation in the contemporary visual culture of Asian ethnic groups? Furthermore, can our existing theories of creativity explicate the cultural phenomena appearing in Asia today? In order to answer these questions, in this article I will discuss various theories and definitions of creativity and highlight some significant related issues. I will also present some of the findings from my recent study on Asian ethnic group creativity as examples of the creative phenomena currently appearing in the region.

Overview of Current Issues in Creativity

The modernist perspective on artistic expression had an enormous influence on the focus of early discussions about creativity. In this perspective, the main approach is to see creativity as a mode of individual

creative self-expression (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987), and to view artists as 'lonely geniuses' (Parsons, 2010). Another approach has been to regard creativity as a thinking process used for problem solving (Torrance, 1977; Wallas, 1926). Since the late 20th century, however, the direction of the discussion has changed, and creativity is now considered as a form of group dynamics in which people work collaboratively and effectively to solve problems (Sawyer, 2007). Most recent discussions include drawing attention to the possible influence of the rise and fall of the middle classes on creativity. Efland (2010) borrows Florida's (2005a) concept of the rise of creative cultures and the creative middle class to raise awareness of this issue further and to seek a possible new direction for art education. In addition to this socio-economic perspective on creativity, one particular account of creativity is reflected in media education. For instance, Duncum (2011) refers to the use of communications media in education as an effective means of facilitating learning. He agrees with Buckingham's (2003) idea that teachers should adopt a playful strategy and set education in the context of popular culture.

Significantly, from the modernist view to current accounts of creativity, most of the relevant literature mentioned above discusses creativity from the perspective of contemporary Western art education, and very few researchers have discussed it from the perspective of the creativity of Asian ethnic groups. It is, therefore, of doubtful use to apply these accounts to interpret the creativity in Asian ethnic group culture. Here, I use the term 'macro perspective' to describe the scenario of creativity suggested by Western art education, and the term 'micro perspective on creativity' to describe the creativity of Asian ethnic groups, in order to distinguish between Western views on creativity and the real world of creativity currently emerging in Asia. I consider that the terms and distinctions employed in this article will help to create an essential framework for discussion, since they make it possible to draw a line excluding discussion of macro views on creativity and emphasizing the issues raised in the article.

Problems with the Macro View of Creativity

Early theories of creativity emphasized an intimate relationship between problem and solution in a real world context. Most of these theories were concerned with looking for a practical solution to a problem. Thus, both the new way of thinking and the thinking process became the focus of study (e.g., Torrance, 1977, 2002; Wallas, 1926). Later, scholars like Sternberg and Lubart (1993) elaborated upon the intelligence dimension and found that the thinking process in creativity involves important elements of intelligence. Besides, the studies of Gardner (2006) and Runco, Dow and Smith (2006) provide further evidence that there is a thinking map and an intelligent pattern hidden in the thinking process during problem solving. Since the beginning of the 21st century, an increasing number of empirical studies have reassessed the relationship between creativity and intelligence from a scientific perspective, by examining creativity as an activity of the brain. Farley (2001) developed a genetic model to explain creative activities and emphasizes the implications for future education, while Winston (2003) investigated the functioning of the human brain and demonstrates how to make good use of our minds. From the early to the more recent studies on creativity, researchers have attempted to understand how we activate and facilitate creativity in the most effective way. They regard creativity as a thinking process, as a tool to achieve practical goals. This kind of understanding of creativity is close to the instrumentalist view, in which creative self-expression is encouraged and in which it is believed that creative outputs are the result of the maximum use of the brain during the thinking process.

Another aspect of the macro perspective on creativity is to regard creativity as a socio-cultural product. Creativity has an intimate relationship with culture. The socio-cultural approach to understanding creativity broadens our vision of creativity in contemporary culture. Indeed, today's world is full of various encoded images that shape our perceptions and construct meaning (Duncum, 2002; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Visual culture thus comprises coded information, meaning and pleasure, and people are accustomed to obtaining these through visual technology

Remapping the
Creativity of
Popular Visual
Culture: A
Perspective on the
Asian Ethnic
Group



(Mirzoeff, 1999). The visual technology also provides platforms such as YouTube for young people to demonstrate their creativity. Scholars like Csikszentmihalyi (1999) and Sawyer (2007) believe that creativity has a socio-cultural foundation and that this influences creative development. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) also explicates creativity as a combination of three essential elements: individual perspective, domain and field.

On the other hand, when interpreting creativity from a macro perspective, we cannot ignore the influences of socio-cultural context or background. Florida (2002) considered the socio-cultural, geographical and economic aspects of creativity (Florida, 2005a, 2005b). In addition, Ray and Anderson (2000) used the term “cultural creatives” to describe late 20th century creative individuals who show respect and concern for ecology, human conditions, living conditions and quality. Although these philosophical claims interpret creativity from a socio-economic perspective, they tend to seek a more universal interpretation and overlook the perspective of Asian ethnic groups on creativity. Within this socio-economic framework, Sawyer (2007) and Paulus and Nijstad (2003) used group creativity to explain the rise of innovation through collaboration. Their studies employ the theory of group genius to break through creativity myths, exploring the socio-cultural dimension further in order to understand creativity better. Sawyer appreciates the creative power of collaboration, stating that innovative ideas can be generated through collaborative effort. Nevertheless, his group genius theory hardly envisages any interaction between group creativity and popular visual culture.

Creativity in Asia expresses itself through the images seen in various forms of popular media. The images of popular visual culture reflect that culture’s influence on creativity. They also imply a particular, common aesthetic notion favored by young adolescents. If we take dōjinshi circles as an example, in the late 1990s there were over 50,000 of these circles in Japan, and the phenomenon spread quickly to other countries (Schodt, 2002). Unlike the professional image-making industry of popular visual culture, the dōjinshi groups comprised many small, amateur and self-funded independent organizations established in Hong Kong and Taiwan. According to a popular Hong Kong dōjinshi website, Douiin Hin (2001), there are 21

registered dōjinshi groups that regularly publish work. In Taiwan, over 39 big comic and animation party events have been organized across the country at Comic World Taiwan (CWT, 2007) since 2005. At these events, various dōjinshi groups exhibit and sell their products to young adolescents. The growing number of these groups highlights the importance of understanding group creativity in popular visual culture in the Chinese context (Douiin Hin, 2001). Nevertheless, few micro-perspective studies of this type of creativity have been undertaken. The literature on the interpretation of group creativity in popular visual culture fails to account for this kind of creativity.

Issues related to Creativity in Asian Ethnic Groups

In this section I shall describe some of the findings from my recent study on the creativity of Asian dōjinshi groups, in order to highlight various aspects of this type of creativity that are overlooked in the macro perspective on creativity. Dōjinshi are groups of amateur creators and appreciators, known as dōjinshi fans, who are interested in reading and creating manga. Brenner (2007) defines manga as comics and print cartoons. In manga, the creators depict their thoughts, feelings, suggestions and criticisms using an exaggerated stylistic method to portray characters or objects, and rewrite stories based on Japanese manga stories. Dōjinshi groups are self-funded and self-published. Although they sell their work (mainly at manga book fairs), publishing and selling dōjinshi for the sake of artistic expression and recognition remain higher goals than profit making (Shufflealliance, 2005).

Although dōjinshi started in Japan, it is now gaining wide popularity in other countries and is no longer just an Asian phenomenon. However, artistic expression and appreciation in Asia are different from those in the US. For instance, Taiwanese manga creators and readers do not favour Superman but those in the West do (Xiao, 2002). For this reason, here I have only used examples from Hong Kong and Taiwan, in order to sharpen the focus of discussion and examine group creativity. One of the aims in this article is to demonstrate the paucity of existing literature related to the subject in question. Therefore, other, non-Asian groups will be excluded from the main discussion.

During 2008-10, I conducted a qualitative study that focused on how these groups interpret and express the creativity of popular visual culture (Lau, 2011). The study involved 32 individuals from two Hong Kong dōjinshi groups and five Taiwan dōjinshi groups. I will address three issues in relation to the topic from the findings of my study.

The first of these concerns the aesthetic values and creativity of the Asian ethnic group. In the study, it was found that both creators and appreciators shared particular aesthetic values, social backgrounds and values in common, leading to a sense of common identity among them that in turn gave rise to creativity in the micro popular visual culture. According to members of all the groups, the groups tended to be loosely structured. Creativity was “affected by uncontrollable and controllable internal and external factors like balance of cost and revenue”, which makes creativity in the groups “predictable and at the same time unpredictable, because works are created in an atmosphere of uncertainty, where adaptations and changes are constantly being made”. The internal driving forces of creativity include “the invisible unifying force, recognition of the members’ identity, praise from peers, and values derived from popular culture”. The external driving forces of creativity include “visible achievements like participating in exhibitions, being published, and production marketing plans”. In addition, “recognition of one’s identity and receiving praise from others (buyers) make us think everything’s worth it. These activities allow us to understand ourselves better”. All the Asian groups represented a vague but concrete, morally acceptable, spiritual consensus. They did not measure value in material terms. The meaning behind the groups’ economic activities was the recognition of particular popular aesthetics and the presentation and practice of particular collective values.

The findings of the study showed that group creativity was short-lived. The simple, independent and flexible management of the groups is a complex, natural, adaptive reaction to outside changes. Group creativity demonstrated the phenomenon of split-combine-split found in individual/organizational interactions. The individual appreciators, with particular aesthetic interests, continuously supported the groups and were able to come together because of the existence of these groups and their

appreciation of creativity. Once the groups had completed the process of establishing a shared sense of identity and had agreed on particular aesthetic values, the members returned to society and waited for the next round of combination and separation. The energy from that combination and separation came from creativity itself. Guided by ethical principles, the influence of creativity formed a wave within the core of society, which spread particular aesthetics to the groups.

The second issue is that of ‘autonomously creative creativity’. Here, this term is used to refer to any creativity that is of an autonomous nature. The display of particular aesthetics through the ideology of autonomously creative creativity is a rite of passage in the quest for shared values and a common identity. In the study, the groups showed that they had clear ideas of how such creativity was constructed and about the quality they wanted for their products. Creativity had to be approved by the group. It was found that group organization and creativity within the whole popular visual culture image-production process resulted in a kind of micro cultural product with a specific ideology – produced by the groups’ relatively self-disciplined, autonomous and loosely structured production process – with specific aesthetic standards and particular styles of expression, bringing life and meaning to specific small groups.

It was also found that autonomously creative creativity relied on invisible organizations and an ethical spirit. One group member declared that “a particular aesthetics responds to a shared sense of identity among creators and appreciators and the formation of values and the ethical spirit of specific groups”. Sustainable creativity linked the whole body of creators and appreciators in the pursuit of self-fulfilment and a common identity. Creativity was maintained by shared values and identities, not by economics. Creativity had an autonomous nature, and, without it, concepts were unlikely to be formed, and the meaning of popular culture would collapse. Hence, creativity in the micro popular visual culture was the concept of a social practice. The formation process of this concept was also the formation process of autonomously creative creativity. Group creativity did not develop in a linear production-management-feedback route, but in a non-linear and relative way



that integrates stability and change. Creativity was able to continue to develop as a result of its own autonomy.

The third issue concerns the groups' creativity and identity. In the study, both group organizations and appreciators established common values and a sense of shared identity through the production and sale of images. Creativity was interpreted as the realization and result of specific aesthetic ideas. One group made the following comment, "In our group, the sense of a shared identity is especially important, as it "represents the purpose and value of our existence". If creativity left the groups, then the recognition of self-identity and values would be lost, and it would be impossible to comprehend micro popular visual culture.

The groups promised to provide appreciators image products of high quality, and appreciators had expectations of the groups' creativity. As one group member stated, creativity in the group was "fused with creators' and appreciators' consensus and common purpose in particular aesthetics". Creativity was limited by the groups' somewhat persistent ideas of popular culture. Behind this persistence, however, lay an ideology of shared identity and values, to which group creativity gave new life. Creators and appreciators manifested specific ideologies through particular aesthetics. Between them they established an anticipation of the creation – the appreciators gave the creators autonomy and freedom in the creative process, and the creators paid them back with work. The groups thus proved the existence of creativity at the micro level, opening the door to autonomously creative creativity.

Concluding Remarks

Significantly, the micro perspective on creativity does not reject aspects of the macro perspective on creativity such as the cultural dimensions proposed by Efland, the problem-solving process identified by Torrance, and Duncum's concept of social identity; however, it demonstrates a different nature and reveals aspects in addition to those covered by the existing literature on creativity. It highlights a strong and intimate relationship between organization, identity and group creativity. With this relationship, there are important issues involving group ethnicity and autonomously

creative creativity that should be considered. Particularly, group organization plays an essential role in creativity, creating freedom of creation and concentrating on peer identity.

Although the findings from my study cannot be generalized to show how creativity works in the contemporary visual culture of Asian ethnic groups, and indeed this is not the focus of discussion in this article, they obviously give rise to the concern that the existing perspective has limitations in terms of explaining the creativity of the Asian ethnic group, and that it has in fact overlooked these issues entirely. In the context of popular visual culture, group creativity allows image creators and appreciators to establish common values and a sense of shared identity for specific groups with particular aesthetics. This autonomously creative creativity carries a profound meaning for both the future development of visual culture and art education. Therefore, more research related to the micro perspective on the creativity of Asian ethnic groups is necessary in order to expand our understanding of creativity. The scope of creativity in the contemporary context should be widened to include the micro aspect.

With regard to education, the micro perspective on group creativity is suggested as a model that may be used for art education. This model is divided into three components: group creativity, identity, and the popular visual cultural context. It challenges existing interpretations of creativity and will offer many benefits to art education. The interpretation of the creativity of micro popular visual cultural groups involves a re-conceptualization of creativity and art education.

This article is a further development of and reflects some ideas expressed in my article published in Australian Art Education, 34(2), 119-137.

Remapping the
Creativity of
Popular Visual
Culture: A
Perspective on the
Asian Ethnic
Group



References

- Brenner, R. E. (2007). *Understanding Manga and Anime*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited/Greenwood.
- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Malden.
- Comic World Taiwan (CWT, 2007). *Comic World Taiwan*. Retrieved April 22, 2009, from Comic World Taiwan:
<http://www.comicworld.com.tw/hp/index.html>
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). Implications of a Systems Perspective for the Study of Creativity. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The Handbook of Creativity* (pp. 313-335). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Duncum, P. (2002). *Clarifying Visual Culture: Art Education*. *Art Education*, 55(3), 6-14.
- Duncum, P. (2009). Toward a Playful Pedagogy: Popular Culture and the Pleasures of Transgression. *Studies in Art Education*, 50(3), 232-244.
- Doujin, Hin. (2001). *Doujinshi Introduction*. Retrieved April 22, 2009, from Doujin Hin: <http://www.animenet.com.hk/doujinshi>
- Efland, A. (2010). From Creative Self Expression to the Rise of the Creative Class: A Speculative Inquiry in the History of Education. *International Journal of Arts Education*, 8 (2), 1-17.
- Farley, F. (2001). A Genetic Model of Creativity and the Type T Personality Complex with Educational Implications. In M. D. Lynch & C. R. Harris (Eds.). *Fostering Creativity in Children, K-8*. (pp. 71-77). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Florida, R. (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Florida, R. (2005a). *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*. New York: HarperBusiness/HarperCollins.
- Florida, R. (2005b). *Cities and the Creative Class*. New York: Routledge.
- Gardner, H. (2006). *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*. New York: Basic Books.

- Lau, C. Y. (2011). Group Creativity in the Popular Visual Culture of Asian Ethnic Groups: A Model for Art Education. *Australian Art Education*, 34(2), 119-137.
- Lowenfeld, V., & Brittain, W. (1987). *Creative and Mental Growth* (8th ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Mirzoeff, N. (1999). *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Parsons, M. (2010). Boxes and Corrals: Creativity and Art Education Revisited. *The International Journal of Arts Education*, 8(2), 31-41.
- Paulus, P., & Nijstad, B. (2003). *Group Creativity: Innovation Through Collaboration*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Ray, P. H., & Anderson, S. R. (2000). *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*. New York: Harmony Books.
- Runco, M., Dow, G., & Smith, W. (2006). Information, Experience, and Divergent Thinking: An Empirical Test. *Creativity Research Journal*, 18 (3), 269.
- Sawyer, K. (2007). *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration*. New York: Perseus Books.
- Schodt, F. L. (2002). *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (3rd ed.). Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press.
- Shufflealliance. (Ed.) (2005). *The Secret of Cosplay and Dōjinshi*. Taipei: Locus.
- Sternberg, R. (2007). *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R., & Lubart, T. (1993). Investing in Creativity. *Psychological Enquiry*, 4(3), 229-232.
- Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2001). *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Xiao, X. W. (2002). *Comics Research: The Communication Perspective*. Taipei: Wu Nan.

Remapping the Creativity of Popular Visual Culture: A Perspective on the Asian Ethnic Group

