

"Multiple Modernisms": A perspective on contemporary Asian globalism

Ray Chen

People say that the Chinese are especially intelligent, I disagree. The Chinese success is not primarily the result of intelligence but rather the result of diligence, self-discipline and regulation with hard work. This lifelong process of applying effective and positive pressure from an early age is what the Chinese refer to as the driving force. Its influences and conditioning is not only affected by particular social, cultural, historical, and family circumstances but also establishes cultural beliefs and values, which in turn, affects those life experiences that shape cultural expectations.

The subject of this talk reflects the critical thinking process, development, and artistic evolution that have opened a vast array of possibilities and challenges worldwide as they break through cultural barriers and confirm their evolutionary path to a more vibrant contemporary ceramic arts expression in the Twenty-First Century. In recent years we have seen a paradigm shift in the way we think about modernity and aesthetic modernism as witnessed in the creation of multiple expressions around the world. The globalization of Asian ceramic art rests upon its discovery of new contexts within the scope of modernism. Globalization remains the most critical channel through which ideological possibilities may adapt and emerge.

Globalization has become a philosophical issue because of its active role and interest in cultural adaptations, integrations and transformations that trigger, in various ways, the development of mass culture changes and a re-structuring of ancient culture templates. The transformation of Asian cultures has drawn much attention, especially since China, joined by other southeastern Asian countries, began opening its doors to the world. More and more people have had a chance to visit, experience and witness the tremendous growth and progress first hand. It did not happen in one day, it took a long time.

Since 1949, China has made great strides upwards, except during some rough times. The Silk Route, the Great Wall, the Terracotta Warriors, The Forbidden City-The Palace Complex in central Beijing, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, and Tiananmen Square were not created yesterday or "now." Also the invention of paper, the printing press, gunpowder, the compass, and acupuncture; and the list goes on; Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism (a blend of three teachings) did not evolve overnight.

The development of Asian globalization has powerful ideological underpinnings which still dominate and continue to bewilder our understanding of the processes and forces. New technologies not only facilitate the growth of international interconnectedness but also cross-border exchanges, as well as, trans-cultural phenomena and help foster cultural transactions.

The globalization of cultures in Asia forges multi-layered experiences and stimulates an emerging aesthetic and cultural consciousness. It holds different views which contribute towards new learning experiments, specifically involving Western learning and adaptation to Western cultures. Some positive Western values have been absorbed by Asians in this process. Asia is re-structuring its position on learning with a new mentality, which fosters growth and promotes cultural exchanges.

A few years ago at the NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) conference, I was talking with Ann Currier, professor of ceramics at Alfred University, New York, The United States, who retired last year. She asked me: "Ray, do you know the term "post studio"? I answered that it may possibly apply to a cross cultural studio experience in the form of a residency. I also returned the question to her: "What is the meaning of 'post studio' from your understanding?" She explained that "post studio" specifically refers to artists in our field who travel to China to work and collaborate with skilled Chinese ceramic laborers in ceramic factories and studios, most commonly in the porcelain capital-Jingdezhen. It is an extension of a work creative and production studio because the work processes and possibilities with the final results can be reached at different levels of completion in time and technique, as well as, at a saving of labor and expense compared to Western home based studios. When the work is completed, artists ship their artwork back to their own home studio. Since artists produce their artworks from a different location than their personal studio, it is called "post studio."

Today, we also ask, what impact, or influence, has Western culture or Western ceramic artists brought into China and Asia through this "post studio" experience and cultural exchange process, and 2), how the new oriental culture, specifically in terms of contemporary ceramics perception, has been integrated and/or adapted from this experience?

The 'post studio' influence has refashioned the relationships between process and vision, and diverted some attention toward aesthetics and concept, as well as, impacted the way Asian clay artists think and work, and apply language as expression to the material. There is a recognition that when breaking with tradition in technique, process and subject matter, there is a new consciousness brought to light by experimentation and/or changes in the way of traditional ceramics making and processing. And, the influence continues to reach beyond physicality and intellectualism. The new concept helps create a new vocabulary for the Asian's large artistic ceramic-making population, gives a new meaning to 'ceramic' and its old traditions, and offers insight into contemporary, revolutionary, and various culturally and progressive related stages of modern and post-modern perspectives. Furthermore, it inspires and stimulates generations of ceramic artists, even those who may still have traditional Eastern artistic motifs in their work, preserving Asian belief, tradition and value, to express their commentary on contemporary artistic movements. It also challenges young and up-coming artists who have pushed themselves new ways to honor their traditions of the past and, who at the same time, want to explore a more personal and unexpected artistic expression, to freely engage their creativity into exaggerated perspectives and expressive distortions in clay to achieve great artistic effects

as a personal language. This 'post studio' experience, overall, represents a significant and new Oriental vision, away from its conventional norms.

Traditionally, oriental ceramic art involves a more mental notion of form; one that is leaning more toward an internal rather than external perception. It is not loud. It is not fast. It is not linear in its approach to composition and thought. It does not place a high value on originality and invention. It is against self-consciousness. It is highly theoretical, but then, theory in Eastern training implies getting beyond theory and learning to listen. Its purpose is not to analyze from the outside, but to understand from within.

Today, the creative process and artistic expression must reach beyond the boundaries of human development, time, culture, and history to expand and impact the changing dynamics of the visible and invisible natural forces that allow the questioning and redefining of new possibilities. Twenty-First Century modernism and post-modernism is characterized by pluralism. The critical thinking of artists around the world vary greatly; especially that of Asian artists who have been carrying oriental customs and traditions within their work, and who have profoundly influenced and disseminated their native philosophy, virtue, etiquette and traditions toward a better quality of artistic expression and research, distinguished by value and process. The process in itself embodies historical and cultural merits. It is a testimony of cultural continuity, change, possibility, and potential that elevates motivation and vision.

Innovation and creativity travel the same path. Expanding cultural relations between East and West, in tandem with increasing global communications, will ensure that Contemporary Asian ceramic today galvanizes its position at the intersection of progress and evolution. Artistic shifts ingrained in past traditions will give way to a more global perspective and vibrate new and fresh energy.

Asian modernism has been a cultural language of openness, forwardness, and focused energy toward connecting with the ever changing modern Western world. Recurrent themes of "nature" and "symmetry", expressed through "balance" and "stability," adorn the power of life and the Asian tradition. To that end, the Asian post-modernist approach continues to explore, derive inspiration and engage in a new cultural connection infused with globalized sensibility and understanding.

Asian tradition rests upon the premise that to be capable is to open the restless mind to many wonders. We discuss and challenge our limitations and objectives; we examine our place in time, consider aesthetics viewpoints, and push existing limits to the next stage, we unfold a multitude of opportunities to reach the broadest and most positive definition of visual expression and quality. We overturn, modify and question our way of seeing and comprehending the contexts of visible and invisible connections that symbolize visual languages. We also expose the symbolic, philosophical vision and aesthetic force of our images as we push the artistic tradition far into the future with possibilities and potential. Questioning is the only constant for learning to wonder about life, as well as, to wonder about art.

Contemporary Asian globalism has the boundless power to cross time, connect history and challenge the intellectual process. Reflective of this changing dynamic, contemporary and post-modern ceramics continues to explore its role and to challenge perceived constraints of the media. Its receptivity to the unexpected and its response to the world aesthetically and intellectually attest to the existence and influence of Asian globalism.

Twenty-First Century Asian globalist thinking in ceramics can broadly exist and be cultivated through initiative, critical thinking and efforts that challenge our intellectual and creative processes. Post-Modernism reflects a time of great progress, and “progress” is an important metaphor for change. Change is seen not as a linear progression, but as a series of networks and flows, connections and reconnections that, because they are always forming and reforming, never have time to solidify.

In conclusion, Asian modernism’s favorable reception into the world today is the result of global interaction and globalization. One of the most noteworthy consequences is the extraordinary increase in number and variety of activities at the regional and international levels; it has generated. Emerging artistic initiatives are creating positive dynamics and have taken onboard an international approach. From Asian tradition to modern times, ceramics and its expression of context, permeated with critical thinking, initiative, cultural significance, and emerging technological innovations, fulfill an important role throughout the world. It entices us to explore ceramic arts in a new context, instinctively motivated by its inviting and responsive sensory qualities. Today, Asian modernism and its globalization not only impact diverse areas of ceramic production but also provide a new base for rethinking and modifying the way we imagine, understand, and are more creative as an artist. As we become more involved with the world and others, and connect our response-ability to our responsibility with both the Arts and the world community; we begin to open ourselves to other imaginative endeavors and commitments, and discover how to keep up with the artistic energy.

Metamorphosis is the beginning of a rebirth that allows us to move fluidly across, above and beyond, and in between Traditions and Modernisms. It gives us a new understanding about contemporary, post-modernism, and what is “current,” and challenges our boundaries, creative expressions and processes, and connections within the rich history of ceramics and artistic movements. It gives rise to a new vitality within the broader body of ceramic art and time, paramount as the future begins.