The campus magazine as an aesthetic experience in a transnational university in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores students' involvement in an extra-curricular journalistic activity set up in a transnational university in China, by drawing on the connection between art, emotions and experience postulated by the philosopher John Dewey. The article will show how undergraduate students verbalized their experience of writing news features and other items for a campus magazine, their motivations for taking part in the magazine, their expectations, the obstacles they had to overcome, and the ways in which they felt rewarded by this experience. This study argues that looking into students' reflections on a magazine production can help broaden our understanding of student media practice as an aesthetic dynamic and structured endeavor characterized by the following traits: novelty, instinct, emotion, struggle, and transformation.

Introduction

Knowledge can stem from a reciprocal exchange between cultures and lead to a new blended dynamic model where some of the existing attributes are integrated, others are lost and new features are created (Murray 2010; Ryan 2013). By taking as a case study the foundation of a student magazine in a Sino-British joint venture university based in China, this article will demonstrate how students created and delved into a journalistic creative experience that simultaneously drew on and defied both the Chinese and the Anglo-American news-making models. The transcultural university is a well suited observatory to detect the challenges and opportunities of being inspired by partially conflicting media paradigms to craft a student-driven media product, which is suitable for the geo-political reality where the transnational university is located (China), in recognition of the fact that, as Armida de la Garza (2021) stated: 'societies today are no longer monolithic (if they ever were)' (58).

The student magazine was a non-credit-bearing extra-curricular project initiated in 2018 under the incentive and guidance of media and communication academic staff members, both Chinese and non-Chinese, who identified in the lack of an English-written news campus publication run by students a missed opportunity to enhance communication between students, teachers and administrators and enrich the student international experience. A university campus publication constitutes a beneficial complement to curricular activities because students can put their knowledge into practice in a potentially creative and experimental context. College media, by operating as laboratories of 'innovation and courage', can help shift students' position from consumers of knowledge to creators of knowledge and this in turn can shape their professional and social identities (Shemberger 2017; Norton 2009). Being part of a newsroom set up in a university can equip students with experience of teamwork and collaborative skills, which are much needed abilities in the professional environment (Landini Wright 2017).

The aim of the student magazine project was to put in place the foundations, through meetings and discussions, for the establishment of a regular printed campus news publication.

In principle, students from any department were welcomed to contribute but first year students enrolled in Western Investigative Journalism who had already attended a basic course of Journalism Theory and Practice (based on American and British textbooks) formed the recruiting base of this initiative. The first issue was published in summer 2018 and produced by an editorial team of undergraduates led by a student, who acted as the founding editor. Students created, designed and managed the publication from scratch, while a teacher of journalism acted as advisor and other staff members helped with the layout and proofreading.

The data collected from the contributors to the magazine over a period of three years, interpreted through the connection between art, emotions, and experience postulated by the philosopher John Dewey, will shed light on how the making of a campus magazine can mold news media practice and principles in a transcultural context, beyond established normative models of journalism. Looking into the students' reflections on the making of the magazine, together with published extracts from the actual content of the articles, will shed light on the role that emotions play in order to learn creatively and remember. The first objective of this study is to provide an overview of how students who grew up in the age of intangible digital media lived the experience of bringing into existence a generalist news campus magazine. It will explore their motivations, the challenges and the moments of reward. The second objective is to elaborate, in light of Dewey's philosophy, on the students' reflections and the magazine's articles' content to point to a connection between aesthetic experience, media production and emotion, and their value to learning.

Literature Review

The term 'transnational', applied to higher education, refers broadly to a system in which students are based in a country that is different from the one where the awarding university is located (APEC 2013, 1). This mode of delivery can include the '2 + 2' formulation in which students are given the opportunity, after the completion of their second year, to move to the country in which the awarding institution is located and remain there until the completion of their degree. This articulation typology of transnational education makes it possible for students to experience both Chinese and foreign education in one program (Dai, Lingard, and Reyes 2018). English is usually the lingua franca in transnational universities and this is also one of transnational education's main selling points for Chinese students, the possibility of mastering oral and written English communication skills while advancing theoretical and practical knowledge of a given subject. Chinese university journalism programs have, somehow, been pioneers in the establishment of a global and transnational approach to media education through the medium of English. It suffices to look at the range of intercontinental influences affecting university journalism formation and practice in China. The first schools of journalism were founded at the beginning of the twentieth century and were directly inspired by the North American Missouri and Columbia Universities. In 1918 Peking University created its first journalism program and, shortly afterwards, St John's in Shanghai

and Yenching in Beijing, in 1921 and 1924 respectively, introduced journalism curricula based on the example of the University of Missouri (Volz and Lee 2009). However,

between the 1950s and 1960s, to make sure the press served the interests of the state, the Soviet journalism model temporarily replaced the American model as a journalistic paradigm (Zhao and Sun 2018; Guo and Chen 2017). For example, in the Soviet model, alignment with the news value of objectivity was not a requirement when reporting on

international news, as 'the socialist countries had only good news; the capitalist countries

had only bad news' (Zhao and Sun 2018, 99). After a period of relative inactivity due to the

banning of American journalism during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), from the

1980s onwards, with the aim of efficiently operationalizing global communication,

China again took up the practice of using English as the main medium for journalism

education by starting programs of international journalism employing American professors

and textbooks (Guo and Chen 2017).

Currently, elements of journalistic professionalism in China are influenced by a Western

paradigm, while the political orientation is underpinned by Soviet models; for instance,

courses of Marxist theory are mandatory in some departments (Xu 2018; Repnikova

2017). Notwithstanding the marked Western influence, as Ke Guo (2011) noted, teachers

of journalism in China are continuously involved in the search for their own distinctive

model of journalism that 'can fit into the Chinese social and media environments,

which may lead to the creation of different teaching and research traditions for journalism

and communication education, unique but appropriate to China' (15). The commercialization

of journalism and the impact of Western ideas on university courses did not halt the

spread of the Party's ideology, which is still fundamental in the curricula (Repnikova 2017).

Mostly, news that delegitimizes the leading role of the central government is the target of

censorship. However, not all news is censored, as Kuang (2018) has shown; the central

state can at times allow the publication of news denouncing illegal or dishonest behavior

by the local leadership 'as this helps the central leadership monitor lower level cadres and

maintains the legitimate ruling of the central state' (169). The disparate treatment of news

under the influence of censorship has implications for what in China is valued as news. In

fact, national security and social responsibility are considered key news values in China

(Guo 2012), while the Anglo-American system of journalism is historically based on the

ideal values of neutral reporting and balance, especially when it comes to controversies.

While there has been much exploration of the growth of communication and journalism programs in China, the research into an equally important media tradition, the student press, needs more development. University print newspapers, as well as online student media outlets, have been recognized as important players in accomplishing the educational aims of Chinese universities (Wu 2004). . Zhou, Chong, and Wang (2016) identified four common types of campus media in China: broadcasting stations, campus print journals, online media and advertisements. Usually, these initiatives are supervised by members of the Communist Party or more specifically by representatives of the Chinese Communist Youth League, which sees in its organ, The China University Media Union, a platform for enhancing the exchange of information between campus media from different Chinese universities. Studies exploring the campus press in China have emphasized the moral, ideological and political functions that college media can perform (Xiao 2010; Yan 2006; Li 2017). Student media are seen as cultural products that exert social functions, enjoying greater freedom than commercial mainstream publications, though serving the socio-political imperatives of the university where they are rooted (Yu and Zhang 2015). Provided that the media convergence outlook is productively optimized, student media are capable of having an impact on society at both the micro and macro levels (Li 2016). Concerns have been expressed over the fact that student media are not keeping up with the rapidly evolving technology and are in need of more professional structuring in terms of both media content and infrastructure in order to meet their goals (Zhou, Chong, and Wang 2016; Li 2016). Working in parallel with the many different ways in which journalism platforms and their content are developing in the actual media actual market is crucial to fully take advantage of the potential for student media to bridge the often criticized gap between academia and industry. Student media constitute active workshops where journalism is practised through research and experimentation and, as such, these laboratories of ideas could revamp journalism programs and stimulate more fruitful connections between educators, scholars and practitioners (Mensing 2010). In fact, as Schunk (2012) argued, learning can acquire greater meaning, if students actively delve into their educational settings, rather than attending inactively to what teachers say. This pedagogical approach, which sees the students as active participants in collaboration with academic staff, has recently been conceptualized

as Students as Partners (SaP). In this model the partnership is considered a

relational process in which faculty engage with students, working and learning together

towards a shared objective (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Cook-Sather, Bovill, and

Felten 2014; Matthews 2016).

In sum, the intrinsic value for students of the experience of taking part in a student run

publication has been recognized at the global level. However, the focus on cognitive

and professional development has led to neglecting the potential of student media as a

resource of human experience and the interconnected roles that emotion and aesthetic

play in this experience. In particular, the rational and intellectual sides of experience

have been prioritized over the emotional aspects, which, although they do not seem

easy to conceptually pin down, are the triggers of many undertakings (Dibiase 2017).

The value of having a direct experience and the ability to make choices and adjust

behavior, according to the demands of a situation, are the tenets of a humanistic

approach to learning, which focuses on how this can enhance personal and social
development (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 2007). Learning is in fact a process,

whereby knowledge is acquired from and constantly changed by experience and, as

such, learning should be seen as a continuous action, rather than a finished product

(Kolb 2015, 37). What is an emotional experience? 'The term 'experience' can refer to the
'condition of being consciously affected by an event', and also 'a condition viewed
subjectively' (OED 2021). According to Dewey (1980), the very fact of living is an
experience, an experience undertaken under conditions of struggle, a struggle between the
subjective self and the surroundings, the interaction of which marks the experience as
emotional, where 'emotion' stands for 'movement', 'agitation'. Experiential learning
emphasizes the role played by feelings, the distinctive status of each experience, as opposed
to general inferences and, finally, an innate, 'artistic' attitude as opposed to a strictly
scientific rational method (Kolb 2015, 105).

The notion of art here must be intended, in its broadest sense, as the theoretical reflection

and/or practical application of certain knowledge through a set of skills to the expression of
oneself. According to this perspective, art is not a product but an experience that can be
deemed artistic, even if it does not result in any tangible artefact. For Dewey (1980, 38), an
experience is emotionally marked when 'it possesses internal integration and fulfillment
reached through ordered and organized movement. This artistic structure may be immediately
felt. In so far, it is esthetic.' In other words, in order to be aesthetic, the experience needs to
develop along a trajectory that leads to an end point, and that makes it complete – we can say
'perfect' in the classical Latin meaning of the word, perfectus, i.e. fully realized. In fact,
Dewey (1980, 55 .) states that, 'in every integral experience there is form because there is
dynamic organization, I call the organization dynamic because it takes time to complete it,

because it is a growth'. Dewey, in his Art as Experience (1980, 19), suggested that a continuity exists between art and everyday life:

> Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience.

Cramerotti (2009) explained in his Aesthetic Journalism that aesthetics is a continuous action in which our emotional response welcomes the various forms of nature and transforms them into concrete experience. Grange (2004) reminds us that in ancient Greek the word αι ˝σθησισ (aisthēsis) meant 'sense', 'feeling'. Grange (2004) explained this connection between emotion and experience postulated by Dewey by emphasizing that meaning is rooted in feeling and, therefore, it is not possible to experience meaning if we cannot feel, and humans first learn meanings rather than facts. As Dewey (1980) noted, emotion has the power to weave connections between the various parts of an experience, including the doing and the perceptions, the physical tangible object and the abstract. This experience has an ethical edge, according to Grange (2004, 3, 19), who, building on Dewey, argues that experience 'can shock us and it can reassure us. It can lead us into strange new lands and it can frustrate our most cherished plans […]. Thus learning is as much about how our heart feels as it is about how our mind thinks.' Given the paucity of literature published on the Chinese student experience with news media in joint-venture universities, this paper will document the making of a campus magazine through students' reflections in relation to their articles. Drawing on these reflections, the paper will explain what could make a newly set up extra-curricular journalistic activity essentially an emotional and aesthetic experience. Adopting an artistic approach to the study of news work in non-Western countries, or in contexts with limited media freedom, though challenging, can extend the epistemological boundaries of journalism education (Postema and Deuze 2020).

Methodology

Nineteen FHEQ1 level 4 (1st year) and level 5 (2nd year) students in Media and Communication Studies who had contributed to the magazine by either writing an article,

providing original photos or assisting with the layout agreed to be interviewed, out of the 36 who had taken part in the magazine.2 The students were asked to reflect upon their experience and their own contribution to the magazine. Examples of their contribution are included in the dataset and interpreted through textual analysis. The interviews pivoted around the following three questions, which were used as the basis of a more extended conversation lasting between half an hour and an hour:

(1) Why did you take part in the student magazine?

(2) Which skills did working for the magazine help you to develop?

(3) What were the greatest challenges?

The semi-structured in-depth interview was chosen as the main data collection method because it uses predetermined questions but leaves room for some flexibility, as the purpose was to use the adaptability of open-ended questions to enhance the researcher's understanding of the interviewee's viewpoint (Norton 2009, 99). In-depth interviews are still methodologically relevant despite the emphasis currently put on big-data driven research (Kumar 2016). Moreover, feelings and perceptions might have been difficult to elicit through questionnaires or other non-dialogic methods of research. Jennifer Mason (2002) qualified interviews as interactional, informal exchanges starting with questions and then developing into a discussion oriented towards address the main research objectives. In addition to the interviews, the findings were informed by direct participant observation.

This method has the advantage of enabling the researcher, through direct involvement in a human experience, to gather information about human behavior and its meaning in a given context (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013). I was involved in the production of the magazine as a faculty advisor for the first issue and as both a faculty advisor and editor for its subsequent issues. The main strength of participant observation is also one of its limitations, as this is a fundamentally qualitative approach characterized by exploratory and illustrative aims and it tends to produce shifting data analysed through interpretative lenses (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013). Getting directly into the exploratory field as a participant implies that the data gathered are unique to whoever is collecting them (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013), which is why interviews were added to re-balance the perspective brought in from the participant researcher. Invitations to take part in the research were sent through email and the interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online telecommunication applications when a face-to-face meeting was not possible.

Although this is not a quantitative study, the answers to the semi-structured questions provided ancillary data, illustrated through bar charts, that are useful to identify themes and spur a discussion about the cognitive and epistemological potentials of media oriented extra-curricular activities. Even if this case study does not lend itself to making generalizations
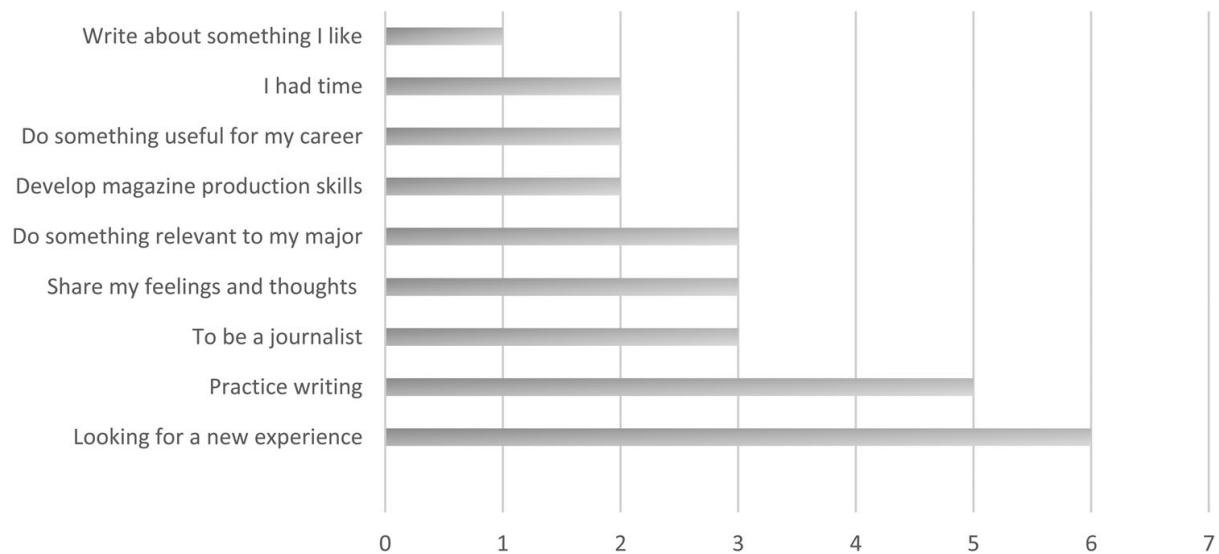
about Chinese students, especially in this context, where the focus is on a joint- partnership university rather than a public Chinese university, the findings gathered through the interviews still provided insightful qualitative data regarding the making of student media in international settings in authoritarian countries and their relation to emotions and art. All of the data related to students have been anonymised and the uses thereof were approved by the University Research Ethics Committee. Of the nineteen students interviewed only two were non-Chinese. Here is some background information about the object of the case study: the magazine has a circulation of 500 print copies while digital PDF copies of it may be informally circulated through social media, but the magazine does not have a website. The page number range between 20 and 50. The publication can be broadly categorized as a generalist magazine including different topics in different formats. There are no set rules: students can publish about any topic of their own interest in the form that they prefer. Each

issue features interviews with students and staff predominantly on academic life; campus

news; film reviews; extended articles about issues of societal relevance such as disability;

pet abandonment; transport but also typically local issues such as traditional town restaurants

and touristic spots. Fashion is a much favored topic with students, who often set up

a photo stage playing as models. The magazine doesn't have a standard stylebook. Each

issue is to some extent a new product, a new experience. The writing format is open to

experimentation with an inclination for the narrative to be in the first person, often developed

as a personal journal. The magazine does not have a permanent physical space of

production; occasionally, students meet up in a pre-booked university meeting room, but

for the most part, communication happens through email and the Chinese instant messaging

app Weixin (the Chinese version of the American WhatsApp). Far from being a limitation,

Melissa Wall (2015) noted how the 'pop-up newsroom', a provisional, virtual

newsroom that makes the most of the convergence of different voices operating at

once without a physical connection to campus, indicates the new directions that journalism

is taking, beyond the classic on-site model of a professional newsroom. To date, the

magazine has collected the contributions of around 36 students across a period of three

years for a total of six issues, published between July 2018 and September 2021.

A new experience

The majority of the students interviewed, to the question of why they decided to take part

in the magazine, answered that they were looking for a 'new experience' (Table 1).

Table 1. Main motivations for joining the student magazine.

Q1: Why did you take part in the student magazine?

Motivation	Value
Write about something I like	1
I had time	2
Do something useful for my career	2
Develop magazine production skills	2
Do something relevant to my major	3
Share my feelings and thoughts	3
To be a journalist	3
Practice writing	5
Looking for a new experience	6

Using Dewey's expression, 'impelling forces' might prompt someone to throw himself or herself into a new experience; impulsion, 'a movement outward and forward of the whole organism', is the very first stage of any complete experience (1980, 60). The magazine constitutes a novel experience because it is made in hard copy and distributed manually

on campus, and it is based on a technology that uses a printing press to reproduce text and images with ink on paper, which is not an integral part of the lives of students, who are used to digital technologies, smartphones, tablets, and messaging apps. The fact that the magazine was created within a transnational environment means that, contrary to most public university publications in China, it has no ties to the Party or any other political student or university association. The students enjoy some individual freedom and with that comes the responsibility of putting their face on the magazine. As one of the students interviewed pointed out, the very fact of showing one's face photo in the contributors page is a big breach of social conventions in China, where 'saving the face', and not directly exposing the self to public criticism and blame, is considered of paramount importance to create fruitful social connections. Participation in the student magazine is a novel experience ultimately because it challenges a consequentialist approach to learning where the freedom to follow one's instinct is sacrificed and with it the possibility to acquire original knowledge.

It would be a mistake to equate 'instinct' with a disorderly tendency. On the contrary, freedom and instinct are manifestations of inhibitory control thanks to which one can exercise the power to carry into effect his/her objectives (Dewey 1969). That is why Dewey's theories are perhaps ideally suited to examining transnational education in a context that traditionally favors obedience to authority. It is important to bear in mind

that though constituting a small progressive liberal context, the transnational university and its student population are overwhelmingly subject to the geo-cultural context in which they are located; a context that in this case feeds upon the Confucian values that identify the teacher as an incontestable authority (Kaur 2020; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010; Stevenson and Stigler 1992), hence limiting the intervention capacity and the free initiative of students.

Reporting as a way of sharing personal emotions

As the editorial of the first pilot issue of the magazine stated, the core value of the magazine lies in offering students a platform for self-expression, in other words, a medium to articulate their individual feelings and thoughts. According to Dewey (1980), self-expression is crucial to communicate one's needs, and as such the magazine is a useful means to identify necessities of students that cannot always be met through a standard academic activity. Yupei, one of the contributors, said:

I wanted to share my thoughts with images and words with others […] I learned another way of writing an article unlike the academic essay. I feel like it illustrates what I think, it's interesting for the audience, it is not tedious like an academic essay.

The extent to which the magazine enables students to share ideas and communicate inner states with the unknown other, through published stories, connects to Dewey's view of the experience as the result of an interaction with an environment that turns into a communicative act. The channel for this interaction is the magazine itself, which provides a site for contributors to socially orient their thoughts and give a rational outlook to their feelings. Another student, Rong, also stated that the view of the magazine as a platform to share emotions played an important role in motivating her to join:

When Covid-19 broke out I was bored at home and I thought that writing something could help me to relax. I wanted to share some feelings through the magazine hoping that this could help others to learn more about Covid-19 or about what students were doing during the outbreak.

One student, for instance, decided to share through verses her loneliness and frustration with remote online teaching, in an attempt to sublimate, by using the rhetorical figure called epizeuxis (the repetition of a word in immediate succession), the tediousness of life during forced isolation: 'Studying, studying, studying; / Watching TV, playing phones, playing phones; / Struggling, struggling, struggling'. From a rhetorical perspective,

the repetitions also make the above an example of 'iconicity': there is a conceived relationship of similarity between the semantic content, the redundancy of life and the syntactical level of the utterance, being redundant itself, hence amplifying the visual impact of the poem and its expressive effect.

Transcending expressive barriers through the power of the visual

As Table 2 shows, the students felt that, above all, the magazine contributed to improving their oral and written communication skills.

Table 2. Magazine production skills.

Q2: Which skills did working for the magazine help you to develop?
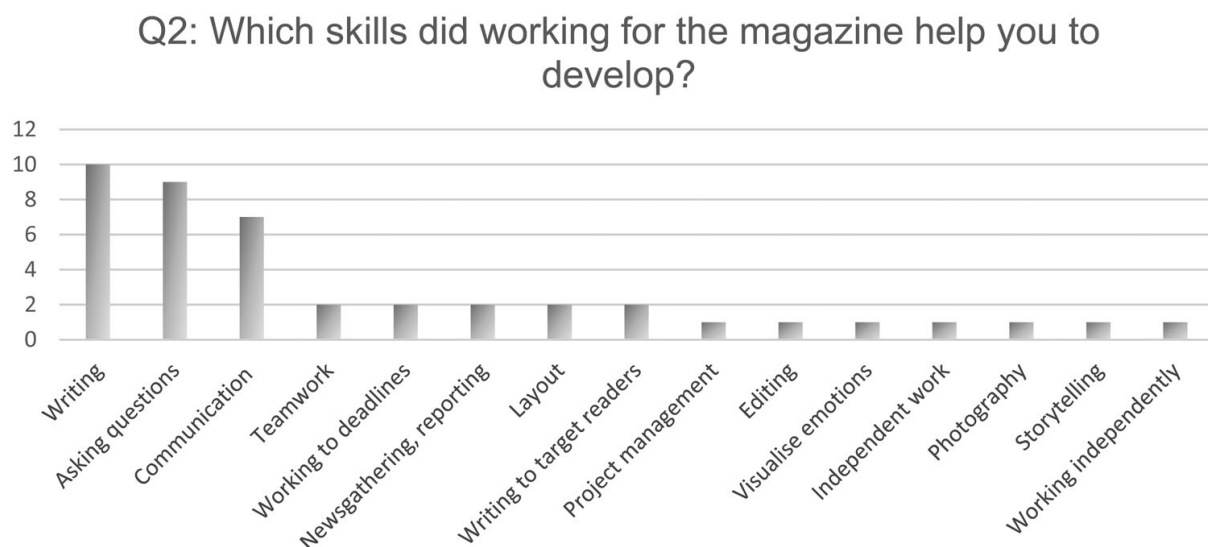
Communication means generating participation; in fact, sharing a remote and singular thought makes real and delineates the contour of the experience of both the person is expressing a particular thought and the receiver of this exchange (Dewey 1980). Since we are looking at a Chinese context, it is perhaps relevant to point to the continuities of the ideas between Dewey and the Chinese philosopher Confucius, when it comes to reflections pertaining to the affective process. Grange (2004), in studying the working connections between the two aforementioned philosophers, highlighted the importance of the value, common to both, of relating meaning to feelings, since meaning cannot be experienced without feeling and 'meaning arises when we sense the difference between what was and what now is' (40). Shi, for example, writing for the magazine about her internship at the Shanghai fashion week, said:

If I hadn't written the article maybe it would have stayed at the level of emotions and emotions are really abstract; you cannot see them, you cannot touch them, but this opportunity allowed me to think in a more logical way and structure the topic, put it into

words, I could visualise it, I could see it, I could touch it and maybe months later when I see it I could say 'at that time I had these feelings'.

The creative involvement of Shi with the magazine took shape through a formative process described in her quote with a before/after comparative parallelism, where she put in contrast immaterial emotions (before) and written words (after). She seemed almost to question the existence of her own experience until the reality of this was given justice through the 'tangible' and 'visible' printed word. The experience was emotionally driven, but emotions alone did not suffice; in order to reach its aesthetic completeness the experience had to go through a transformative cycle, reaching an end point, which was when the world portrayed by the student left her very own personal subjective dimension to lend itself to be passed on to others. The cost of making the experience tangible, of communicating it, was that she no longer owned it, and as such it was susceptible to external inferences.

The ways in which abstract ideas may take shape and be visualized also resounded with the words of Ting, the former Art Director of the magazine. Ting, who was in charge of curating the physical arrangement of the text, explained that the layout of the magazine is what equips it with the magical power to take readers through a metaphorical journey where graphic designs created with typography orientate the reader's eye from one letter to the other, and from one page to the other. Ting took up the role of Art Director, inheriting it from the former editor, after the pilot issue was released. She gave a distinctive expressionistic imprint to the magazine, signaling its departure from a seemingly Western type of publication committed to the display of putatively objective realistic representations to a more hybrid form, prioritizing the personal expression of students in both the written and visual content.

As a faculty advisor of the magazine, I encouraged students to use only original images to make them understand the importance of unique imagery in a heavily visually driven society. This posed a challenge especially for the cover of each issue. Therefore, Ting solved the problem of the paucity of good quality first-hand photos by adopting symbolic creative design. For instance, the cover of her first issue displayed a structure analogous to, but not exactly representative of, a lighthouse 'offering navigational aids' (Figure 1).
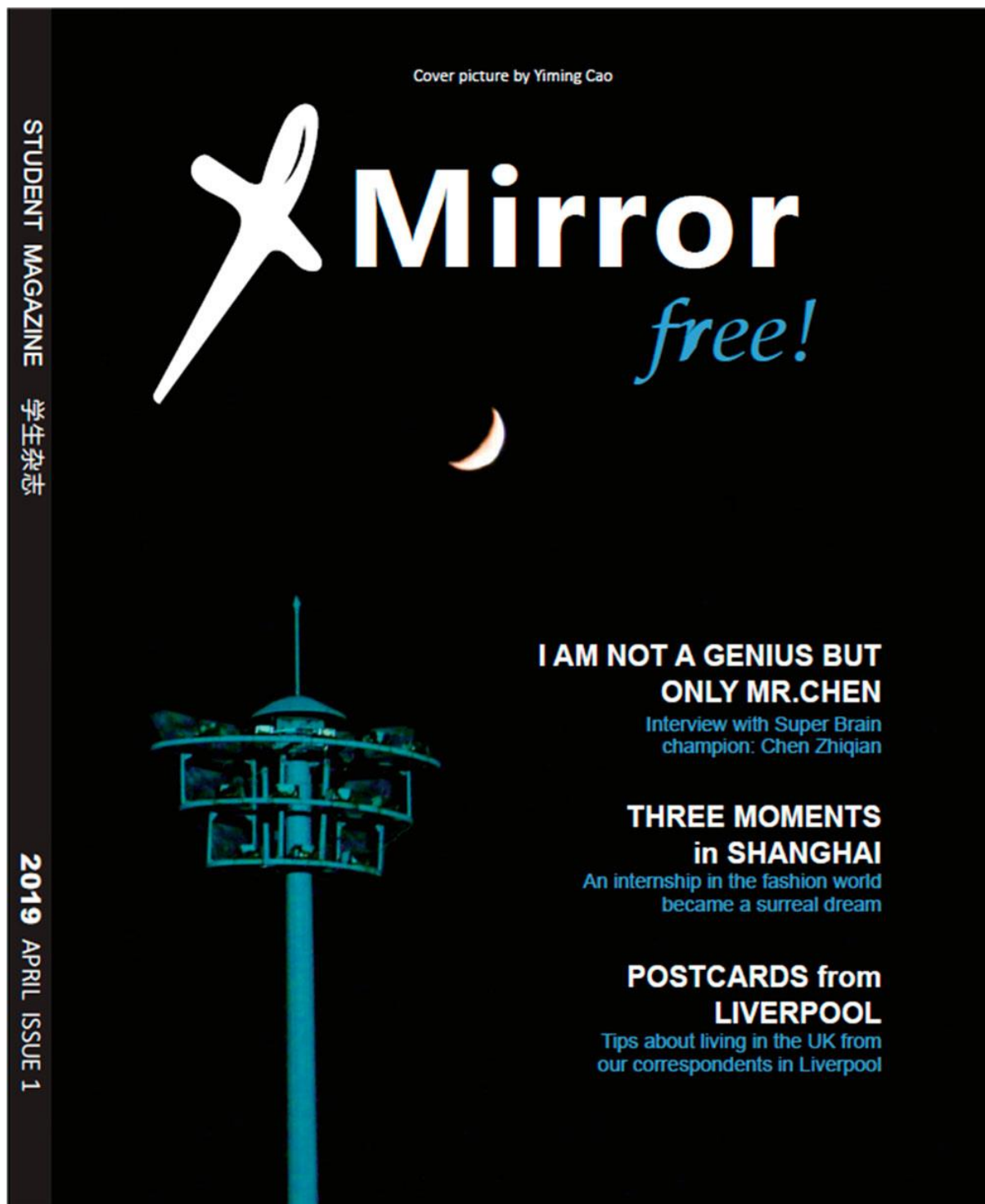
Figure 1. Cover page of the magazine, April 2019.

As Ting explained, 'it is something that sends out and receives signals, similar to our magazine in that it collects and spreads out ideas'. In her second issue, for the cover, she used an original photo of a banyan tree trunk with its branches extending against the sky (Figure 2). The analogy is similar to that of the lighthouse, the proposition of

seeing the magazine as a center of emanation of ideas reaching out for something higher up.

Figure 2. Photo of a banyan tree used for the cover page of the magazine, October 2019.

The representation of the sky is indeed a frequent topos in the selection of images. Another example occurred in the closing page of the issue of April 2019 (Figure 3): the irregular distribution of stars against a dark and limpid sky that stands in contrast with the monotonous architectural style of a student dorm. From the dorm's windows, though, lights shine so as to parallel the starred sky in a sort of musical counterpoint. This image is placed aside the section of the magazine for Corrections and Clarifications,

bearing no logical connection with the image displayed and reminding readers to avoid looking for direct logical links and allowing them to be transported by a magic journey, borrowing the metaphor used by Ting.

Figure 3. Student dorm at night. The photo was published in the magazine, April 2019.

The lack of availability of first-hand taken pictures made Ting resort to alternative ways of depicting the subjects of the stories, conveying reality through subjectively shaping abstract forms. In another example, in order to visually enhance an extended feature about a research poster undergraduate exhibition, she used a line drawing of an outline silhouette to depict what for her represented 'A schoolgirl swimming in the ocean of knowledge', as she explained (Figure 4).

Figure 4. 'A schoolgirl swimming in the ocean of knowledge', printed in the magazine, July 2020.

Striving for expression beyond conventional communicative forms was the origin of a conceptual collage that a student proposed for the July issue of 2020. The piece displayed a colorful assemblage of different images and forms to represent abstract depictions of human figures, with the aim of conveying what she said 'seems impossible to achieve or express'. To accompany her abstract visual creations, she wrote:

In the process of deconstruction and reconstruction, there are countless possibilities among which I have to make decisions. Those random or even intuitive choices help to achieve the unpredictable effect in the end. This process has brought me infinite freedom and joy.

For this work, Ting used an alternative style to present the byline. We know that the byline is the text placed on top or at the bottom of an article giving the author's name. As a rule of thumb, all of the bylines in a publication should have the same font and size in order to enhance the consistency of the style and signal to readers that similar content has a

similar presentation style. The byline for this piece was written down 30 times, distorting the name of the author (e.g. Bo Cheng) by attaching her surname to the preposition 'by', as in the example,

By Bo ChengBy Bo ChengBy Bo ChengBy

Ting explained her choice: 'The byline looks like a computer error and challenges readers' existing understanding of how to present the byline and the body text. Add to the surreal tone of this student's work'. The use of headlines written vertically along the margins of a page with half words cut off the page aligns with her creative approach: it is 'one of my experiments to play around with the established rules of graphic design,' Ting said. For an interview with a student who won a reality TV show competition, instead of using his photo, she deployed a representative technique called the Layered Threshold Effect (Figure 5), a reminder of the stencil technique often used in surrealist art.

Figure 5. A Computer Science student holding the trophy of a science competition reality show in China, magazine, April 2019.

Transformation through resistance

Resistance is fundamental in meaningfully shaping one's experience (Dewey 1980). The development of the potential of a personality can be fully actualized only in reciprocal actions with surrounding circumstances and the presence of an opposition is crucial to

develop one's sense of self (Dewey 1980). This is why understanding the problems and obstacles that students met during the process helps to demonstrate their level of engagement and the transformative efforts that made the experience artistically expressive. For Xixi the greatest challenge was the revision process:

The most difficult part was editing my own article, communicating multiple times with the editor, it took time because we had different ideas. I thought the first draft of my article was good enough to be published but it turns out it needed to be shortened. I needed to amend the content to protect the privacy of my sources.

Another major difficulty for students and perhaps strong deterrent in general in terms of committing to the magazine was connected to time constraints (Table 3).

University curricula are organized so as to make the achievement of grades the focus of the academic experience. This apparent paradox and consequentialist approach, upon which both the British and the Chinese systems are based, is likely to cause students and teachers to perceive the exploration of the self, through participation in an extracurricular activity, such as a student magazine, as a distraction from more easily measurable outcomes that are recognized by the society as immediately useful, e.g. a transcript with high grades.

Table 3. Common problems encountered during the magazine production.

Q3: Which were the greatest challenges?
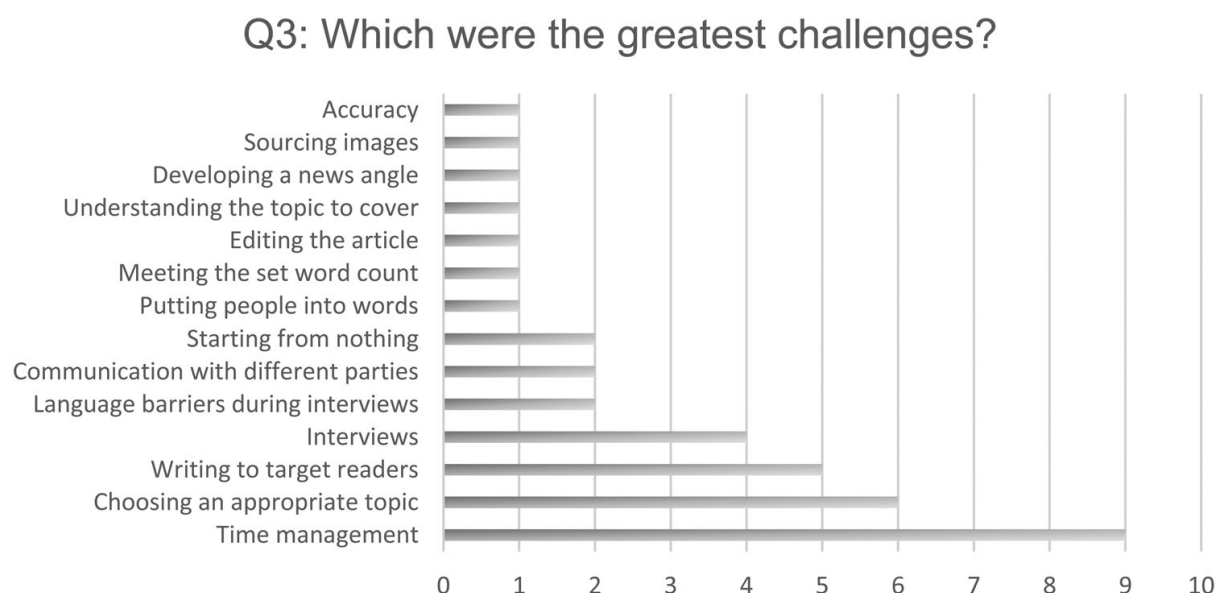
The former editor for the 2018 issue of the magazine said that it was

difficult to ask her peers to submit articles for publication because they were under

pressure to complete their credit-bearing assignments; with some contributors not delivering

what they had promised. Wen said: 'Many students have very clear goals, focusing

on obtaining internship certifications and letters of recommendation, they don't see a

contribution to the student magazine as something that can help them for their postgraduate

application.' This is a misconception because the lack of regular direct engagement

in creative activities during students' degrees would be a major problem for

students of media education, a field that aims to produce 'well-rounded' students

equipped with creative, critical thinking and practical skills (AEJMC/ASJMC 1996).

Therefore, it is evident that a strong goal-oriented attitude, which is a response to a top-down

imposed scheme of priorities, may limit the freedom of a student who has to adapt to a

ready-made organization where she/he has no agency. The authenticity of the experience

was unanimously recognized as an essential condition to preserve the unique

value of writing for the magazine. Overall, the students felt that a utilitarian approach

to the task would affect the choice of topics and writing style, whilst the students

enjoyed the freedom that this experience offered them. To the question of whether a

way to incentivize students to contribute to the magazine was to provide credits for

each submission, Shi replied: 'If we turn the magazine into an assessment there will

not be a sincere passion to join the team, we will simply be motivated by the desire

to gain high marks'. Ting echoed her, saying: 'There would be less diversity in the articles,

I could not write about things I like'. Liu added: 'If I write for an assignment I will have to

consider the marking criteria whereas the magazine gives us much more freedom'. Rue

said: 'Writing for an assignment is different, an assignment is a task rather than something

that we really want to do, we love to do'. Originality was one of the reasons identified

by the students for differentiating the work from a non-credit-bearing activity and

assessed works. Wen said:

Plagiarism is common in assignments, so if an assignment copied from another source gets
published, this would have a stronger impact on the student. If this became a mandatory
curricular activity, part of the assignment, we would become passive to do something rather
than an active attitude, the result would not be that good. You are active and the result is

good because you want to write something that you want to express.

Self-expression of one's individuality is a key ingredient to make a work fresh and original (Dewey 1980). In fact, Yupei explained:

I would write just to get credit not because I want to share my voice with others…the quality would not be that good, the story would not be that authentic or genuine. If you are really into this article you will see the issue in many aspects, if there's a credit to gain you might be just looking up at the internet maybe copy a piece of work there and put it together as an article, paraphrase a few sentences, but there is nothing about your ideas.

Conclusion

This paper presented and examined how a group of undergraduate students in a transnational university in China verbalized their first-time involvement with the production of a print student magazine. In-depth semi-structured interviews demonstrated that students used the magazine as an intimist form of creative individual expression. A textual analysis of the content of the magazine corroborates their self-disclosed approach, showing the deployment of highly metaphorical and symbolic text and images. The magazine constitutes a means for communicating inner feelings, providing an insight into how the external reality was processed by students through perceptions and mental abstractions, and then turned into a published story. Students sought to express the impact of an emotional experience rather than trying to objectively represent it, debunking both Western and Chinese principles of journalistic practice, like adherence to an ideal of objectivity for the former, or alignment with one dominant idea for the latter. Moreover, drawing on the connection between artistic expression, emotions and experience postulated by American philosopher John Dewey, this study argues that an experience of creation and contribution to a student publication can be defined as aesthetic.

The experience of producing the magazine can be distilled into five dimensions: The start of the experience driven by an impelling force to try something new; the students' need to give a visible form to emotions via written text or visuals; the struggle to make a thought real and share it with others via a communal language; the transformation of a student's abstract desire to see something happening into the event. Novelty, instinct, emotions, struggle, and transformation alternate in a cyclic way, each time a new issue

is printed, contributing to the learners' growth.

The lived experience with the magazine is a work of art because, borrowing an expression from Dewey, it results from 'the development of an expressive act' (69). Both process and product are the result of a dynamic struggle for freedom of expression that sees the transformation of thoughts into an emotionally infused media product, beyond academic conventions, journalistic professional values and societal expectations. An educational environment resulting from two potentially clashing ideologies is an ideal site to observe creativity at work when it comes to media practice, because neither norm, the Anglo-American nor the Chinese one, can prevail entirely over the other, since both are characterized by mutually exclusive features, and hence a gap is generated where something unique might arise.

Notes

1. UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.

2. All 36 students were invited to participate in individual interviews.

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