

From Yijing to Immersion: Integrating Traditional Chinese Aesthetics into a Digital Immersive Art Curriculum

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Abstract:

Digital media art education has always been limited by the structure of technical training and cultural literacy. Based on the organising idea of Yijing (poetic artistic conception), this paper reports on the five weeks of intensive pedagogical reform practice. The goals of the curriculum have been changed, a new four-stage teaching model of “decoding - translating - creating - critiquing” has been added, and a two-dimensional assessment guide to help students move away from the traditional aesthetic concept towards digital creation ability has also been released. According to the qualitative assessment, the works by students have shown an increase in cultural connotation and experiential value, and their sense of emotion is deeper. Problems in the evaluation criteria and differentiation of instruction for students at different levels of technical ability have also been identified, and this may provide some references for other school reforms.

Keywords:

Yijing, Chinese Traditional Aesthetics, Digital Immersive Art, Pedagogical Reform

1. Introduction

Digital Immersive Art is gradually appearing in the public cultural areas and cultural-tourism consumption sectors. TeamLab has shown us the charm of light environments, and now many other places in China are adding their own immersive exhibitions, creating strong demand for all sorts of cross-disciplinary creative talents. Yet, the classrooms of digital media art programs have a different story. Students have become very good at operating software and can create works that are visually striking and interactive; however, at their cultural level, they still lack depth. The more advanced the techniques, the more obvious the emptiness of meaning. Students are familiar with the traditional aesthetic concepts of the Yijing and “Qi Yun”, but this familiarity is mainly at the level of theory; these ideas have not yet entered the realm of creative practice. Knowledge and Doing are now developing independently.

Due to the problem above, the author designed and carried out five weeks of teaching for the “Digital Painting: Immersive Art Creation” course in the Visual Design major at Huizhou University. Yijing is an outstanding typical work of Chinese traditional culture, and thus this course will introduce the conception of aesthetics and

related content. Action research is the framework of this paper, and qualitative methods will be used to record and analyse the teaching process.

2. Intent as the Guide of the Realm: Pedagogical Operationalisation of Traditional Aesthetics

Yijing is one of the fundamental categories of Chinese aesthetics, but its philosophical ideas are too subtle and complex for direct integration into the curriculum. Zong Baihua said in “Yijing: Perceptions of the Infinite in the Finite” [1] that the Yijing is “perception of the infinite within the finite”, and Ye Lang thought that it is based on an “image beyond the image” [2] and the reciprocal activation of the subject's aesthetic responsiveness. Although these are good expressions, they do not inspire us in terms of creative works. Thus, the first goal of instructional design was to translate the *Yijing* into a working language that could be talked about, planned and judged, but without losing its spirit of poetry.

This paper will take three practical aspects of the Yijing. The first is “the realm arises beyond the image”: negative space is not the lack of something but a design idea for withholding information, which proactively draws the attention of the viewer to what has not been explicitly stated. The second is “emotion and scene in mutual fusion” the bodily movements of the experiencer can form a part of the emotional story, and the pace and form of the interaction behaviour directly change how deep the yijing is in real time. Thirdly, there is “the void and the solid engendering each other” in this sense, a hierarchy of perception exists, and it can be mapped to the tension structure of visual density, sound atmosphere and interactive feedback in the digital world. Together, these three aspects will provide the basic structure for all the following instruction in the course.

Theoretically, this reform is based on the constructivist learning theory and transformative learning framework; thus, it is known that people build their own knowledge by doing in real situations rather than being taught passively. Digital immersive media have the attributes of multi-sense integration, real-time interaction and spatial narrative, so they are in line with the generative logic of the Yijing [3]. This structure is suitable for the current reform of traditional aesthetics and can help connect the historical distance of classical ideas with the reality of life and creation.

3. Seeing Through the Mirror: Problem Diagnosis Before Reform

At the beginning of writing this paper, the author distributed a questionnaire and organised a focus group with 32 third-year undergraduates to find out how familiar they were with the Yijing in creative practice. From the above analysis, it can be concluded that although students have mastered some aesthetic vocabulary from traditional Chinese, such as “ethereal transcendence” and “negative space”, in their actual creation, they tend to emphasise technical perfection too much.

A review of the 30 similar assignments from the previous group was also quite helpful. Eleven works have drawn on traditional culture, but nine of them are little more than an accumulation of recognisable visual signs - such as *ShanShui* landscape conventions and *QingHua* blue-and-white patterns - and have failed to achieve any genuine transformative reconstruction of the essential internal logic of the Yijing. Some students' interviews revealed that they knew they should use the Yijing to enrich the cultural background of their works, but did not know how to start; They were aware of all the instruments. I have no idea either. These admissions are not due

to technical deficiencies but to a lack of conceptualisation; I have been taught that technical work should be done first.

This deep-seated habit of “technology first, thinking later” shows that there is a structural problem in the design of the curriculum itself; namely, the cultural goals and the technical goals are not in harmony at the level of course structure. The existing assessment system has exacerbated this problem; as a result, the weight of the evaluation factors for technical application is far too high, and students have been continually told for three years of college that their skills are the main focus, whereas cultural connotation is merely decoration.

Therefore, after diagnosis and investigation, it was determined that pedagogical reform was needed to some extent. The first need was no longer to have students grasp the Yijing as an idea from a scholarly distance, but rather to train them in using it to make design choices in daily life; thus, it shifted from aesthetic literacy to aesthetic agency.

4. Five-Week Pathway: Decoding-Translating-Creating-Critiquing

Based on the above diagnosis, the five-week course was divided into four stages, and the results of each stage provided the basis for the construction of the next stage in order to build an interconnected chain of conceptual understanding and creative application.

The first week was the decoding module, and case studies were used to deconstruct Yijing aesthetics. Ma Yuan's landscape paintings were next to the particle distributions in the class, and Song Dynasty flower-and-bird paintings were presented in the form of procedurally generated pictures. Students were asked to extract general design principles that can be applied from cross-temporal perception comparisons independently and write these principles on small “principle cards”. The main point of this task is that the concepts are not given to the students but are rather “discovered” by them through comparison analysis.

The second week was the translation module, which was considered the main part of the reform. A set of paired translation exercises was developed; LiuBai (negative space) is associated with the interaction-timing design, YiXiang (imagery) is related to parametric generation logic, and XuShi (the vacuous and the solid) is linked to the spatial layering structure. For each exercise, students first had to draw a Yijing blueprint - that is, plan emotions, voids and solids, and blanks using simple visual language before performing any digital operations, and then turn it into a technical plan. First, this changed the traditional way of working; now we search for meaning after building the scene.

The third and fourth weeks were the Creation Module. In groups of three or four, the students built an all-encompassing prototype according to the style of the old Yi Jing. At this time, the starting point of the teacher's feedback was not “Where is the error in the code?”, but rather “What feelings did this Design evoke in me?”.

The fifth week was the critique period, and at this time, the works were released to the public outside the university. A group should invite a few members of the audience for off-the-record interviews and learn how they form their own interpretations. The above data are used to study the discrepancy between the purpose of Design and media realisation. The first kind of construction for this is to draw real, untrained, ordinary viewers into the teaching activity so that the difference between

the teacher's intention and the viewers' perception can be directly observed and thus trigger profound learning [4]. At the same time, the evaluation system was reformed to give the same weight to Yijing expression and technical implementation, benchmark exemplars were set to provide aesthetic standards, and they were thus changed from implicit to explicit.

5. Constructing Yijing in the Classroom: Documentation of Exemplary Teaching Vignettes

The first goal of the Translating Module is to enable students to create a ninety-second sense of immersion in the world of classical poems; Group A selected Li Bai's *Jing Ye Si*. Although the first one was technically feasible, it did not look good; there was a uniform spread of blue moonlight particles across the whole screen. During the critique, the teacher asked only one question: "How long is the duration of the *yi* (suspicion, the state of not knowing yet) in the line 'suspecting that it is frost on the ground'?" Where is the audience's experience of hesitation? After a long discussion, the group rearranged the temporal order of the work: the first frame will be completely dark for three seconds before moonlight slowly pools and spreads from a single corner of the space. Many times in the audience interviews conducted after this, the participants said that they felt "disoriented", "suddenly numb", and "as if slowly waking up from a dream".

Group B chose Liu Zongyuan's *Jiang Xue*. Its first edition was nothing more than a single figure floating in a uniform field of white; people often thought that it was "empty" or "blank", but after a group discussion in class, they were inspired to add a small procedural-generated snow texture and a faint sound of wind, and something appeared in the void - thus, xushi obtained the attribute of matter existing in emptiness.

Both cases reach the same teaching idea: students need to stop being passive observers of the literal emptiness in a picture and start to experience the concept of an 'Appellstruktur' in terms of Iser's aesthetics; that is to say, it is a type of creative void that is actively prompted by the audience's imagination [5]. Traversals cannot be carried out by instructions; rather, they need to be done many times in the cycle of creation, feedback and correction.

Group C has created a whole work called *Mu Shan* based on the landscape theme, and in this work, there is a mist-control system that changes dynamically according to how fast the audience moves in Xushi, connecting the body with the changing scenes. One of the experiencees mentioned in the post-visit interview was "it made me think of a certain memory", an offhand comment that shows the work has stimulated people's associations.

Group D's *Chì Bì · Shì* also took this road and employed the real-time respiratory data of the participants to control the dissolution and coalescence of water-surface particles, forming a fusion of emotion and scene that is an authentic embodied encoding relationship between one's own physiological rhythm and the visual flow of time.

Although the depth and achievements of the works were different among the groups, taken together they provide meaningful support for the idea that the transformation of the Yijing can be done in a short period.

6. Conclusions

The main conclusion reached from this teaching reform is that, rather than adding a separate theory course to the curriculum for digital art, it is more practical to operate on the fundamental ideas of Chinese traditional aesthetics as a Design Language that can be used repeatedly in creation and experimentation. The Yi Jing is not something to be merely memorised. On the contrary, it is a system of perception and creation that needs to be continuously cultivated; the four stages of pedagogy for Decoding - Translating - Creating - Critiquing have internal logical consistency, and both the demand of the Yijing sketch and the structure of audience interviews can effectively break students' fixed creative habits, so the interactive, temporal and multisensory characteristics of digital immersive media are very suitable for this type of training.

In the future, more participants will be involved, the evaluation norms for the expression of the Yijing will be raised further, and various technical instructions will be developed to create transferable pedagogical references for similar curriculum reform.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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