

# Design in Familiar and Unfamiliar Cultures

## Yun Gao

### Biography

Dr Yun Gao works as an academic and architect. She is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK. Yun received her PhD in Architecture from the University of Edinburgh in 1998. She is editor of *University of Huddersfield Architecture Year Book* and is the visiting Professor to the School of Design, Yunnan Arts University, China. Her academic research explores design of socially responsible and environmentally sustainable built environments in developing countries, traditional and cultural changes reflected in architectural and urban development, and cross-cultural design.

One area of her research is to investigate how the contemporary building technology and regulatory guidelines for architectural design have been understood and adapted to meet the need and aspirations of people in developing countries. Her research has been published as a number of journal papers and also as a book *Architecture of Dai Nationality in Yunnan, China*, by Beijing University Press in 2003.

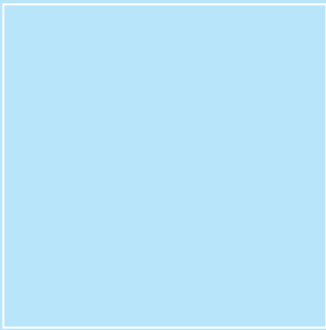
Another of Yun's on-going research subjects is cross-cultural architectural design in Higher Education. The study investigates the curriculum that encourages students to consciously design with cultural and environmental sensitivity in a variety of cultural and geographical locations. Yun has developed a four-step task in the overseas field trips to foster cross-culture awareness and inter-cultural communicative strategies. This method has been used in our Architectural International Course. Yun is the editor and one of the authors of the book *Being There – Reflections on 20 years of International Courses at the Huddersfield Department of Architecture*, published by the University of Huddersfield Press in 2010. This project was supported by HEA-CEBE Innovative Project funding 2010 (The Higher Education Academy – Centre for Education in the Built Environment) and PMI2 Connect International Mobility of UK Students (Prime Minister's Initiative) in 2010 and 2009.

Yun is a RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) and ARB (Architecture Register Board) registered architect. Before joining the University of Huddersfield, Yun worked on more than 30 architectural projects in architectural practices at Bristol, which included a wide range of projects from schools, a university laboratory, community centres and housing to commercial centres.

### Current Research

Since the early 1990s, Yun's research has focused on the traditional houses and habitat in Southwest China and South East Asia that developed within the context of integrated traditional cultural systems in traditional societies. Apart from considering the physical determinants, climatic constraints and aesthetic meanings of vernacular architecture in these regions, her study explores how 'the house', 'social structure', 'kinship and marriage', 'politics', 'economics' and 'religion' are ideologically integrated in these societies.

Based on the research of vernacular architecture in these contexts, Yun's research also investigates the transformation and changes of traditional houses and habitat under the influence of global consumer culture and tourism, which includes the following two strands. First, Yun intends to capture evidence of the developments of traditional houses and habitat under the influence of globalisation. She studies the transformation and changes, which represent the tensions of local people's desires for the modernity and for keeping traditions in developing countries. Yun's research investigates the changing definitions of old and new, traditional and modern, in various regions. Contemporary transformation of architecture and built environment has shown the re-contextualisation and hybridisation of these concepts. For example, residential buildings and the wall enclose compounds in Southwest China demonstrated that some foreign architectural signs and symbols were





interpreted and then restated with signs and symbols in the local language, whereas others were mixing within the local urban fabric without interpretation. Very often those transcribed signs and symbols are used as imported brand images. Yun's studies explore the processes that local architecture exploits and seek various ways of incorporating different cultural concepts and meanings through 'translation' and 'transcription' based on their distinct cultural and social environments.

The second aspect of her study intends to capture evidence of the development of traditional built environments under the influence of tourism. It studies the close link between the culture favoured and produced by the local people and the material transformations of the place due to the development of tourism. It compares the developments of urban landscape where there is an increasing interest in the effects of hybrid juxtaposition between traditional and modern, and in the tourist areas where

the indigenous tradition are reinvented for the tourists. The study explores how the traditional local houses and built environments have been perceived and constructed in the process of the development when different social actors make meaning of the place relating to their belief, perceptions and experience.

Another subject of Yun Gao's on-going research is to explore the cross-cultural design in architectural education. Her study focuses on the International Architectural Courses at the University of Huddersfield that has been taught for the last 20 years. The course includes field trips to non-European regions and the development of design projects set in the context of the regions visited. The study investigates why architectural training needs overseas field trips, what students will learn in the field study and how to arrange the joint group work with local communities and expertise.

Yun's research investigates the curriculum that encourages students to consciously design with cultural and environmental sensitivity in a variety of cultural and geographical locations. Related to this study on multicultural education, Yun is now working on a university funded project to investigate Chinese students' learning experience in the UK. Chinese students come to the UK with different expectations and a different understanding of the processes of teaching and learning. The aim of this project is to explore these differences so that the students' awareness can be increased and they can adapt more easily to Western systems, and so that tutors can understand the distinctive needs of Chinese students more fully and adapt their provision accordingly.

