

# Global Tracks and Immersive Models

Multi-year international educational programs such as dual-degree tracks are complex academic arrangements that can provide a stronger link between education, profession and the global environment thereby establishing a more meaningful immersion experience. From the perspective of a faculty member in residence at the host institution for one year, this paper discusses the composition and driving forces behind the first two years of a novel dual-degree program between universities in Honolulu, HI and Shanghai, China.

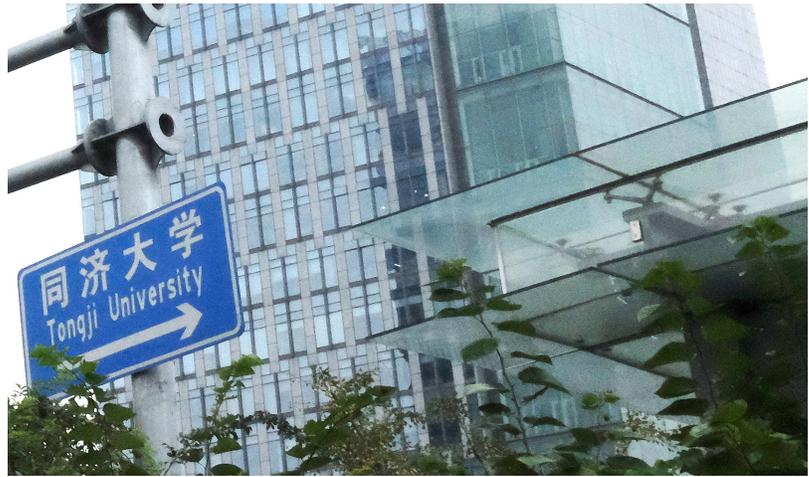
The practice of architecture today occurs at a global scale and must address issues beyond borders and immediate frames of time. This paper examines how educators prepare students for this through various study abroad models and discusses in detail a new study abroad program. The survey of the nature of international education and in-depth case study of this three-year dual degree program are from the perspective of the current resident director- an American university faculty member posted in Shanghai for one year. It establishes the context of the a professional dual-degree program between Tongji University in Shanghai and the University of Hawaii in Honolulu, contrasting similarities and differences in specific pedagogy and how they are reconciled.

While student exchange programs are certainly not new, Chinese and Western Universities are experimenting with a variety of new, immersive educational models. Though Western curricula have helped shape the Chinese higher education sector, there is a much greater flow of 'eastern' students to the 'west'. According to the Institute of International Education, in the United States alone 58% of international students are from Asia with Chinese students making up more than half of that group.<sup>1</sup> This trend is predicted to continue, ostensibly through US policies designed to encourage this flow, however the globally-engaged academic community is also seeing a dramatic rise in non-western universities looking to participate in, rather than just contribute to, these new models.

These new programs look to engage students more deeply with their respective host countries, with their field of study and the global environment; they also have the potential to strengthen the quality of work, understanding and perceptions of all the parties involved; these new models are truly immersive. However, the goals and potentials of programs such as these are no small undertaking, especially for a relatively small school. A three year program containing two degrees, two separate thesis documents and an international internship experience requires a level

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4

of planning and coordination that is unprecedented among most architectural programs. And while shorter and/or independent study abroad programs can achieve some of these goals, they are no longer sufficient to provide all of them. The accommodation of more diverse student bodies requires more educational opportunities to suit them and, in turn, educational environments that offer more.

#### **THE PROGRAM MODEL**

Global Track|China Focus is most concisely described as a professional, graduate architecture program spanning two international institutions. It is set within the University of Hawaii's existing 90 credit NAAB accredited graduate program and operates in partnership with Tongji University in Shanghai. Each class is a studio sized group comprised of students from both Universities. It takes three years to complete, including at least one summer. For the student participants it results in one professional architecture degree in the US and one professional degree in China.

#### **THE DRIVERS AND DEMAND**

Why students choose to study abroad is straightforward- it is often the opportunity of a better educational program or the desire for a new experience. However *how* students study abroad is a much more complex subject. It is also one that is changing rapidly as the possibilities and demand for global connectivity increases, not least among those studying and designing the built environment.

Study abroad programs are established with the student in mind, and while the students are always a beneficiaries of a study abroad experience it is not only the individual student that has the opportunity to take something significant away from it. Treated the right way the experience can positively affect nearly all parties involved and really become about impacting the broader educational system. It is important for educators and administrators working in these areas to look at these programs in this larger context. In China this is well understood, as their educational system is one of the major beneficiaries of having so many of their own students studying abroad. The Chinese are deeply invested and experienced with educational outreach. While only around 5% of US students choose to study in China, nearly one third of the international students studying in the US are from China. Most of the Chinese international students are also studying at the graduate level and therefore may have a greater likelihood of maintaining a connection with the educational system.<sup>2</sup>

For the US there can be a similar takeaway in bolstering these types of educational settings. New curriculums can play into these figures and allow students from

Figure1: Tongji University, Shanghai, China.



different countries to work together in their host and primary environments. These may be permanent programs that take advantage of doing so over a longer term.

Our partner institution, Tongji College of Architecture and Urban Planning (CAUP) has 18 American partnerships and 100 exchange students at any given time. It is well versed in traditional exchange programs; approximately half of these students are in short term exchange programs and the other 50 in less conventional dual-degree programs. Those that are in a dual degree program are either undergraduate architecture students or non-architecture design students as the GT program is the only accredited program with this relationship, and as a consequence of our accreditation, the only Tongji partnership that has Shanghai students taught by a UH faculty. Including the School of Architecture, the University of Hawaii sends about 300 of our students to study internationally each year, and about a third of those are actually taught by UH faculty.<sup>3</sup>

**THE FACULTY RESIDENCY**

One significant difference between this and other dual-degree programs is the faculty sharing and residency arrangements. The establishment of a resident director position in the host country of China was a major shift in how the typical exchange program would function and is representative of the dual degree program mission- namely the intertwining of two educational parties. This is a defining element of the partnership which occurred because of NAAB requirements, but also in support of the program. The rotating faculty position known as the resident director is held by a UH faculty member, who then lives in China full time anywhere from one to four semesters. Their role in China is to teach, support the students, manage coordination between the UH curriculum and facilitate the portions of the program that Tongji manages.

Aside from short study abroad trips led by faculty, the notion of an on-site director and instructor may seem counter productive to the immersive experience that most study abroad programs seek to provide. However the benefits of including faculty ‘exchanges’ as part of the arrangement add long term value by linking the institutions and students over time- and are true reflection of the partnership between the institutions. The formation of the program required many visits and personal discussions between the involved parties before it could

Figure 2: Global Track program map.

get off the ground and the ongoing success of the program will come from the maintenance of this relationship. This is especially true in China, where relationships and trust take time.

At this stage, establishing working relationships with local designers, educators and consultants has been invaluable to making the resident directorship work. For a new resident director it is important to connect with as many people in the community as early as possible in order to make sure the courses and work are appropriately tailored to the GT program and that they take full advantage of the setting. The length of stay for the faculty resident director is important because it allows them to establish a critical base of work in China. Short duration or visiting faculty rotations would not accomplish the same research goals. As well traveled and well read as we all are, China is still a foreign place. The strengths of ones work and ability to understand a topic comes from being there.

#### **THE DETAILS**

To participate in the full program students must be accepted into both institutions independently. The requirements of each institution are maintained individually but managed and aligned to the greatest extent possible. The program has a full time director, who helped establish the program and who much of our present relationship with China is built around. To a large extent the relationship between the Universities really is the program, and consequently its maintenance is where the majority of time and effort are spent. There are several elements to this coordination including the management of the curriculums, institutional requirements, and the management of various US-China legal requirements.

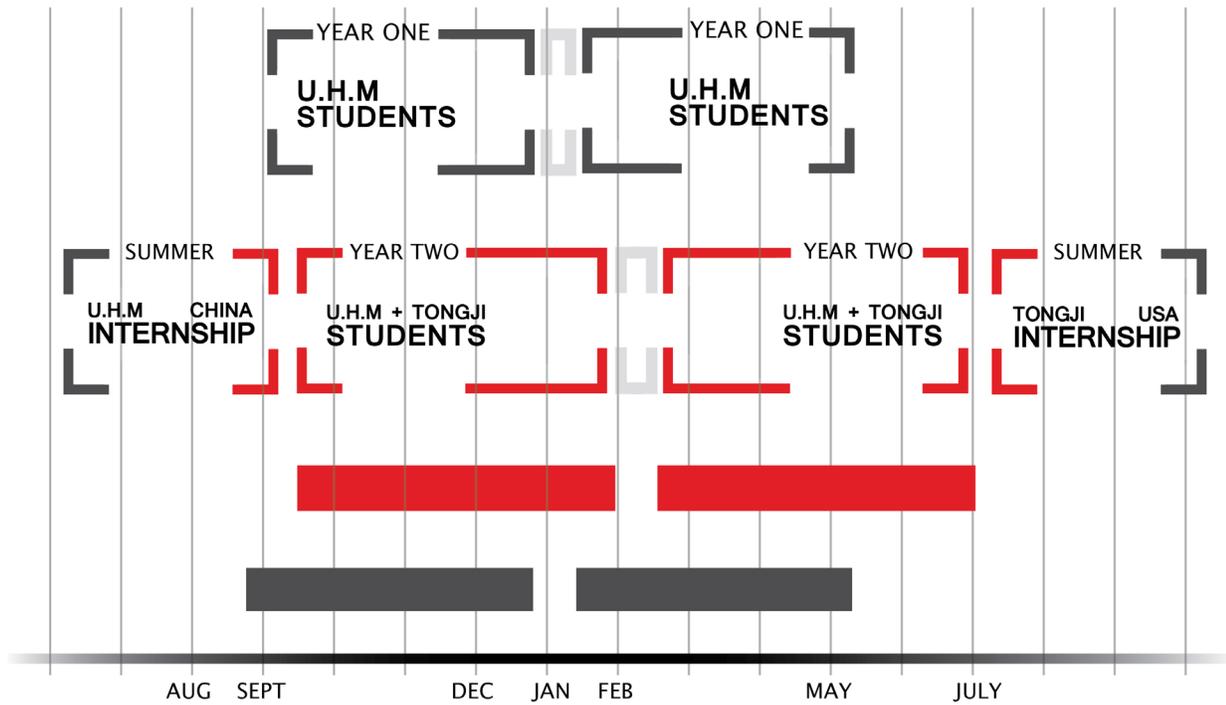
Though the program does have a dedicated director and core team, these faculty do not operate alone and the program does not function autonomously within the School of Architecture. Because the track is fully contained within the existing graduate program and all courses related to the UH degree are taught by UH faculty, the Graduate chair and student services director are and remain all highly involved and invaluable to the program. Stemming from that our all faculty members become inherently involved in the Track by the very nature of it being a track within the University.

#### **THE CURRICULUM**

UH students first apply to the UH graduate program. At the same time they may apply for the Global Track and, if accepted, take their first year of school in Hawaii. The studio projects during this first year relate to China and global practice and provide a warm up for the next year in China. The studio also frequently engages with professionals in the Hawaii community who are involved in work abroad; the support of the community has been an invaluable resource for the program. Hawaii has a strong international presence, especially with the Asia-Pacific region, and this program takes full advantage.

The UH students have a internship experience as part of the established UH grad program and those in the GT program currently complete this requirement at an office in China the summer before their second year. Because of this requirement, students head to China very soon after the spring semester ends in Hawaii. This is the start of their immersion and it is a very quick lesson on the independence that will be required of them for the duration.

After the summer, they move to Shanghai to find housing, meet the resident director and begin class at Tongji. During this year the students take two studio



courses and regular architecture electives. They also take elective courses at Tongji. At the host institution we have a classroom that is remotely connected to UH so that frequent communication can take place, and while this sounds promising, the realities of regular international communication can be difficult. Not all of these are due to Chinese censorship, but because of the ‘great firewall’ its most helpful to utilize a vpn or other workaround to access the internet.

The second year is spent in Shanghai and operates according to the Tongji and China schedule, which is one of the biggest disconnects between China and the US educational systems. The Chinese academic calendar begins two week later than Hawaii’s does and lasts at least two weeks longer. This means that Fall class does not end until January. The winter ‘Chinese new year’ break is long and the spring semester lasts from until July. This is less of a problem for the students, however the faculty in residence must be willing to accommodate a longer teaching year and disjointed holiday breaks.

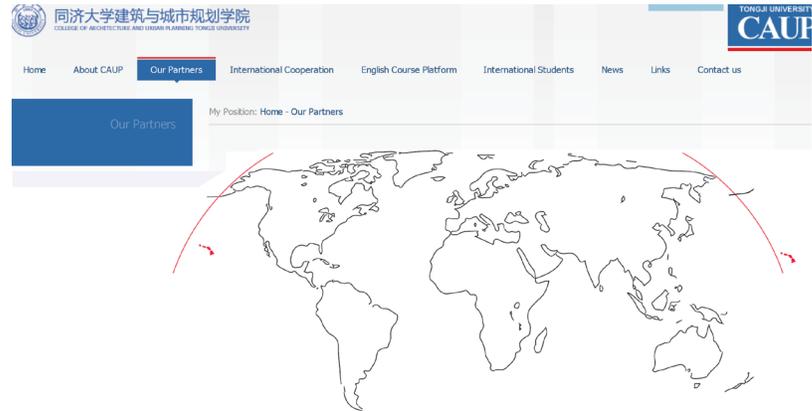
The semester calendar and schedule also varies. Some holidays are announced in advance, however it does take time to find out about them and their implications. Other holidays exact dates are changed as the semester moves along, for example the Chinese New Year holiday dates. Another interesting condition to note is that during the semester most holidays actually extend the work week into the weekend. If one particular day of the week is a national holiday then you are most often expected to work or hold class on the weekend to make up for it.

**WHY ITS WORKING**

Setting up a program like this take a lot of effort, but it is the structure and basic outline that makes it work. It needs to be the right fit for the universities in the first place. In Hawaii the connection to Asia is felt very strongly in day to day life, and indeed the University’s primary focus is on Asia and Pacific Rim.

Hawaii of course is fairly remote geographically, its the westernmost arch school in the USA, but its by no means remote. It has very strong sense of its connection

to Asia and to the mainland USA. On our promotional material for the program track we put Hawaii in the center of the map, however this is not because we feel Hawaii is in the center, its because we feel tied to Asia just as strongly as to North America. Similarly, Tongji uses a map that brackets the globe, which equally reflects how we feel connected globally.



7

The program is able to quickly insert them into the global architectural platform, allowing new chances to experience and participate in this connection from the other side. The students are very aware of this, and feel more a part of something that they have seen and experienced from Hawaii for some time.

#### CONCLUSION

Being the faculty resident director this past year provided the opportunity to both observe and experience the value of putting students from two distinct and global institutions together. Most architecture schools in the US offer at least one internally backed exchange, and often let students participate in any number of outside opportunities, however as an educator working in such an internationally connected place, engaging with students in a new learning environment where they must address new, global and cultural issues together was invaluable. Even the students initial commitment to a demanding program that integrates such culturally diverse students at this level itself establishes a certain mind-set that will have a lasting impact on their lives; the way they are already thinking about their work as young designers shows a remarkable sensitivity to context, culture and the globalized world that would not have been present with an exchange program focused on just traveling to China. And what the participating students get is only one potential upside of the program; how the curriculum, faculty and institutions engage each other is all part of the greater immersion experience.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Institute of International Education. "Fast Facts Report 2013." Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. <http://www.iie.org/opendoors> Web.
2. Institute of International Education. "Open Doors Fact Sheet: China." Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. <http://www.iie.org/opendoors> Web.
3. University of Hawaii, Study Abroad Center. <http://www.study-abroad.org> Web.
4. Image by Author.
5. Global Track China Focus promotional poster map. University of Hawaii Manoa School of Architecture. 2013.
6. Global Track curriculum: Chinese and US semester schedule overlay. University of Hawaii Manoa School of Architecture. 2013.
7. Bracketed. Hawaii location overlay from Tongji CAUP website partners map. 2013.