



Contents List available at Zibeline International Publishing

I Tech Mag

Journal Homepage:
https://doi.org/....

ISSN:
ISSN:



THE IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON THE CREATIVE ECOLOGY OF A HERITAGE VILLAGE: A CASE STUDY FROM MALAYSIA

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article history:

Received .. September 20...

Accepted December 20....

Available online January 20...

Keywords:

Brassware craft, Craft values, Terengganu, Design

ABSTRACT:

This paper presents the results of in-depth research into brassware craft production in the Kuala Terengganu region of Malaysia. This region has been long recognised as the national capital of brassware handicrafts. Here, traditional knowledge and wisdom are made manifest by skilled artisans who use local materials to create culturally distinctive products. These products and practices have strong historical connections to the people of the region, to the notion of place and to the sense of community. However, in recent decades, this handicraft industry, like many others around the world, has been in decline. The effects of globalisation and modernisation have affected the viability of craft practice within the craft community as well as the way local societies perceive and value craft products. In addition, the intrinsic values and meaning of craft practice within the larger context of cultural, philosophical and social factors associated with place have yet to be fully understood. Previous research has discussed evidence that shows that important values, such as heritage value, philosophical value and the value of a place, are closely tied to craft practices. This present study examines how the brassware craft community and broader society understand and value the products and practices, along with their contribution to Malaysia culture, identity and sense of place. Disappointingly, findings indicate that these values and meanings are perceived to be unimportant and unappreciated not only by the local people but even by some of those in the craft community itself. This paper presents this research and looks at how design might contribute in raising the perceived value of these traditional artefacts, the related practices, and their significance in Malaysia. Collaboration among various parties is needed in order to educate people about the value of these practices and to promote the artefacts in and beyond the community, especially in terms of their cultural, philosophical and historical significance and their relationship to place, culture, community and identity. Education, affirmation and promotion has the potential to stimulate a greater appreciation and sense of belonging towards Malaysia's traditional material culture and potentially raise the profile, and prospects for these important craft practices.

INTRODUCTION

TERENGGANU: "Beautiful State with Wonderful Culture"

"Negeri Cantik Budaya Menarik" is one of the famous tagline synonyms with the identity and image of the state of Terengganu, situated next to East Coast of Malaysia Peninsula. The beauty of Terengganu centres on its stunning panoramic view of the whitest and finest shoreline, diversity and richness of natural resources and surrounded by greenery, in the form of tropical rainforest. Terengganu is also a state that is rich with its artistic crafts, traditional heritage and traditional food, all of which represent Terengganu's identity and culture. In the 19th century, there was so much craft manufacture in the region that Westerners even named Terengganu the "Birmingham of the Peninsular" (Embong, 2012, p. 32). Hugh Clifford in 1895 and William Skeat in 1899 reported that Terengganu Malays are notable for their excellent craftsmanship in constructing vessels in addition to being skilful in fabricating fine metalwork and wood carvings (Embong, 2012, p. 33). They also produced silk, textiles, traditional weapons and many more (Terengganu [SUK], 1999); Cheah, 2013, p. 168). It is worth mentioning that, in 2015, the state of Terengganu was one of the largest handicraft producers in Malaysia (Data.gov.my, 2016)

Kuala Terengganu – Heritage Waterfront City"

Kuala Terengganu as a state capital has the tagline '*Bandaraya Warisan Pesisir Air*' (Waterfront Heritage City). Since at least the 15th century, the district of Kuala Terengganu has been well-known for its diverse material culture production, within the state of Terengganu, Malaysia and further afield. Kuala Terengganu has always been known as the capital of the traditional brassware handicraft industry, with a sizeable population of highly skilled artisans (Ahmad, 2000; Ismail, 2009). It was a common sight in Kuala Terengganu in the 1970s to see brassware handicraft production workshops operate close to living quarters and this legacy has been passed down for generations spanning a few hundred years (Ismail, 2009). The existence of these family-run workshops is largely a result of development of earlier civilizations in Terengganu, which have flourished with time.

The impact of globalisation on traditional material culture

The effects of globalisation, urbanisation and modernisation have changed the nature of the creative craft ecology and its community in ways that has created significant challenges to the survival of traditional knowledge of craftsmanship, local natural resources and creative industries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2016, p. 12; Hosagrahar et al., 2016, p. 7; James, 2015, p. 24). However, in our present post-industrial era, Margetts (2010, p.373) argues that the virtue of slowness in traditional craft must be reconsidered, not least because modernisation tends to destroy traditional craft industry. Modern industry, through global-scale corporations, produces mass production factory-based "craft" products that imitate traditional crafts and threaten the livelihoods of many local craftspeople (Walker, 2013, p. 105; Basole, 2014, p. 1).

In recent decades, the brassware handicraft industry in Malaysia has been in decline. The decreasing number of skilled artisans and lack of interest by the younger generation have caused the brassware handicraft industry in the primary brassware region of Terengganu to stagnate. In the 1980s, approximately 150 artisans actively produced brassware and this decade is regarded as the high point of this handicraft in Terengganu. Nowadays, young people are usually not interested in continuing the legacy

of a family-oriented-business. This may be due to several factors, but lack of adequate financial reward and economic viability perhaps especially notable. In many places around the world, the younger generation do not perceive this field as a good prospect for income generation, and this factor was mentioned by 85% of the informants in this present study.

Today, brassware handicrafts are no longer a primary source of income for the region (Data.gov.my, 2016). The effects of commercial development in the city of Kuala Terengganu have resulted in the demolition of houses and brassware workshops in several villages, especially in Kampung Ladang and Kampung Tanjung. Therefore, most brassware entrepreneurs and artisans have moved away and no longer produce brassware handicrafts. Currently, there are fewer than ten brassware artisans still producing brassware. In addition, the effects of globalisation and a slow-moving economy have gradually eroded inter-generational knowledge transfer and traditional knowledge of brassware craftsmanship and have led to the near extinction of the industry.

The Traditional Brassware Handicraft Making Process

Brassware making is a risky job with an uncertain outcome (Walker, 2013, p. 101). However, as with other artistic metalworking, there is pleasure to be found in the element of surprise at the outcome (Fillis, 2012, p. 27). Traditional manufactured and crafted brassware products in Terengganu are made using the method known as *cire perdue* or lost wax casting (Hunt, 1980; Ismail, 2009; Backman, 2016). A master pattern is made by shaping a block of wood using a traditional spinning machine locally known as a *bindu*. This pattern is then dipped into hot wax until it is covered in a few layers, to make the wax pattern. The wax pattern is then removed from the master pattern for the moulding process. A mixture of clay, sand and paddy husk is then applied to wax pattern, in three layers. After drying, the clay is heated in the furnace for the de-waxing process, where the wax melts and escapes from the clay mould. Molten brass is then poured into the clay mould to replace the 'lost wax'. The brass is then allowed to cool, the clay mould is broken away and the brass article is then finished with filing and polishing (Ismail, 2009; Backman, 2016).

Local relevance

For every country, the potential value of handicrafts as representative of local material culture and traditions is surprising. According to Ferraro et al. (2011), numerous scholars and organisations have reported the potential relevance of preserving handicrafts in the era of globalisation. This potential lies in local relevance and cultural heritage values (Cheah, 2013; Yusof et al., 2013; Lah et al., 2015; Hosagrahar et al., 2016). The production of traditional handicrafts manifests as an engagement between the maker, local materials, and the product, which is strongly connected and emotionally related to history and meaning, as well as connected to place and a sense of community (Drake, 2003, pp. 519-521; Walker, 2014, p. 92; Brown, 2014, p. 6; Hosagrahar et al., 2016, p. 17). Moreover, Walker (2014, p. 92) and Brown (2014, p. 7) link locality to the concept of sustainability in the context of trade and economic scale, the historical value of place (environment), the sense of community (social) and a sense of belonging (cultural). All these elements could be closely integrated to create a better understanding of local material culture within societies in order to achieve a more meaningful and sustainable lifestyle (UCLG, 2009, p. 30). It is apparent that localisation is being increasingly recognised as one of the fundamental elements in building resilient societies, which is why 'localism' (i.e. decision making at

the local level) has recently become part of political discourse all around the globe (Ferraro et al., 2011, p. 17; McPeake, 2013; Brown, 2014, p. 24; James, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study examines how the brassware craft community and broader society understand and value brassware craft products and practices and their contribution to Malaysian culture, identity and sense of place. The data collection process comprises both desk research and field research. Qualitative research methods were employed during the field research, which involves semi-structured interviews with 37 informants who were experts from different areas and who had different roles in brassware handicraft, specifically in Terengganu, Malaysia. These have been clustered as 'Producer (n=13)', 'Supporter (n=17)' and 'Buyer/Trader (n=7)'. After the data analysis of semi-structured interviews, the researcher identified several elements that required further study. This led to a series of case studies within the brassware communities in Terengganu, Malaysia. The case studies involved direct observation and documentation of processes, perspectives and attitudes, to develop an in-depth understanding of the relationship between culturally significant products, design and practice of brassware craft and its association with the place and sense of community. This method was combined with other data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Observations were carried out at several selected home-based brassware workshops and located in the district of Kuala Terengganu in the state of Terengganu, Malaysia. Through this research, the aim is to build a better understanding, not least because there is a lack of previous studies on this topic.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Re-building the creative ecology of Kampung Ladang as a heritage village

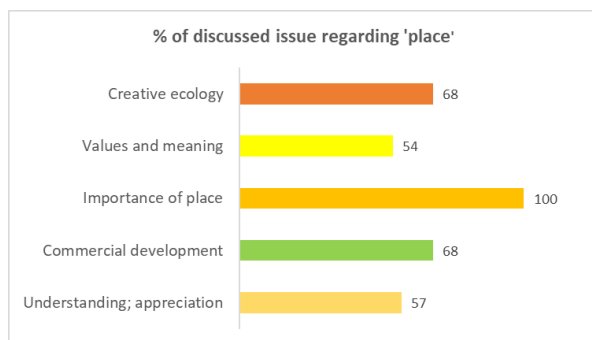


Figure 1: Significant discussed issues regarding 'place'

The term 'creative ecology' is suitable for representing Kampung Ladang located in the district of Kuala Terengganu. Creative ecology refers to a place where creative people practise creative activities to fulfil the needs of the society in which they live. The elements of a creative ecology involve the relationship between 'people', 'practice', 'product', 'place', 'process' and 'personal' (see Figure 2).

Five sub-themes of issue emerged from the analysis of semi-structured interview regarding the 'theme: place' are presented in Figure 1. 100% of the informants voiced out about the importance of place (Kampung Ladang) as a heritage village and aware that it needs to be preserved, re-built and taken care of by the authorities. But this is not happening as this location is slowly diminishing due to commercial development that has taken over the village and led to massive demolition of a number of

workshops. This meant that the craft practitioners, brassware makers and other craftspeople had to move out and find somewhere else to restart their craft activities. Therefore, to safeguard the cultural heritage of the brassware handicraft and to ensure its sustainability, it is necessary to educate, affirm and promote this important cultural asset, especially among the younger generation. Without such efforts, brassware handicraft might soon vanish.

Lack of understanding of the values and meaning of material culture

The literature on this topic discusses the significant values associated with these kinds of practices - such as historical value, the value of place (locality), traditional 'tacit' knowledge of brassware as part of a material culture that is closely associated with lifestyle and local societies. Clearly, traditional craftsmanship has intrinsic value, as this traditional knowledge is passed from generation to generation. Values are one of the essential elements in preservation work and the understanding of the values of heritage assets that matter in preservation could motivate the individual and societies to change towards a better lifestyle (Blackmore et al., 2013, p. 34; Sood & Tulchin, 2014). The meaning and value of handicraft and craftsmanship lie in their symbolic (Rees, 1997, p. 128; Murray, 2011, p. 1) and artistic value outside the mainstream (Walker, 2011, p. 9). However, the finding from the semi-structured interview (see Figure 1) indicates that, the intrinsic values and meaning of craft practice within the larger context of cultural, philosophical and social factors associated with place have yet to be fully understood, and these values and meanings are perceived to be unimportant and unappreciated not only by the local people but even by some of those in the craft community itself.

The vision of having a thriving creative ecology of Kuala Terengganu and re-building Kampung Ladang as a brassware hub can be achieved via the collaborative efforts between researcher, brassware producers, supporters and buyer. Besides that, the finding indicates that, co-practice has long been practiced between brassware craft producer and a few organisations in Terengganu. However, the analysis revealed that, it raised an unanswered question about the effectiveness of previous co-practice efforts within brassware craft industry. Lack of effective communication and lack of knowledge, afraid of unknown are among the issues hinder brassware sector as well as its community to re-grow.



Figure 2: Creative ecology element

Co-practice as an effective Sustainable Practice

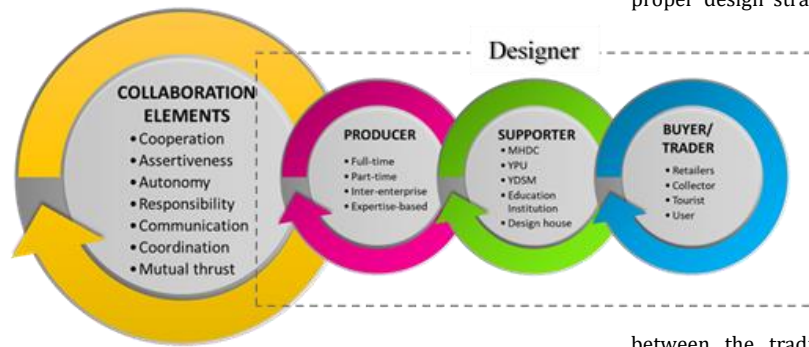


Figure 3: Co-practice elements

There is a growing body of literature – for example, Sanders & Stappers (2008), Daskon & Binns (2009), Tung (2012), Busch et al. (2014) and Dessein et al. (2015) - that has begun to recognise the significance of craft-design collaboration for the sustainability of culturally significant products, designs and practices. The purpose of co-practice is to build a new spirit of societal values (Daskon & Binns, 2009, p. 503) through cross- and inter-disciplinary collaboration in balancing the happiness of humankind during the craft practice process in the circle of the creative ecology (Dessein et al., 2015, p. 9). Therefore, co-practice is adopted as one of the potential innovative approaches to re-building and re-branding the creative ecology of Kampung Ladang in the district of Kuala Terengganu. The finding from the case study indicates that co-practice can be effective in bridging the gap between innovative academics, industrial experts, policy makers, stakeholders and craft producers in order to identify potential solutions for revitalising brassware practices in Terengganu. Therefore, co-design practice within an effective design framework was structured and proposed to gain support from policy makers and convey the knowledge in order to deepen their understanding. In doing so, potentially it might help them recognize the importance and the values of place that represent the identity and culture of the society of that place. Several programs have been done where designer been the bridge to re-connect and convey the information between producer, supporter and buyer/trader. Strong evidence of the effectiveness of co-design practice was found based on the positive feedbacks gathered from the stakeholders on the success of several efforts and programs that have been implemented such as; product updating; branding and image development; online presence and website design; marketing materials (web content, photos, brochures, point of sale information that conveys the history and tradition etc.); packaging design etc.

CONCLUSION

Integrating traditional knowledge of brassware handicrafts into the principles of sustainability is especially important and timely today; this is also one of the goals of the new 2030 Agenda (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2016). Brassware handicraft production could offer many potential benefits for local people in many ways, which are in accord with the principles of sustainability, including economic development through employment and income generation; human and social developments through apprenticeship and knowledge transfer, thus strengthening the relationship within and between communities. Beyond its contribution to socio-economic areas,

brassware handicraft production could also contribute to the cultural heritage and identity of Terengganu, Malaysia. With proper design strategies and effective planning, this heritage industry has the potential to go far by highlighting the value of collaboration in craft-design work as one of the sustainable practices, and there is potential for artisans, designers and policy makers to create through synergy. Design has been identified as having the potential to make radical changes and contribute for value creation; knowledge exchange; and changes in the interaction among stakeholders; as well as to bridge the gap between the traditional and modern production; and the changing of the market. The value of alliances could provide an opportunity to all parties to engage in learning and exchange tacit knowledge, perspectives, and insights.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Stuart Walker for his endless advice, support, guidance and motivation throughout this research process. I am also deeply grateful and must thank to my sponsor, the Ministry of Education Malaysia for the award of the funding which enabled me to undertake this study. This appreciation also goes to all informants that have contributed a lot in this study.

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