

Design Process in Retrieving the Local Wisdom and Communal Identity: A Case Study of Bangchaocha's Bamboo Basketry Crafts

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This study aims to find out the method of retrieving the indigenous knowledge and cultural and artistic identity in local craftsmanship through design thinking and activities. Taking bamboo basketry product as the case study, Bangchaocha Sub-district in Ang Thong Province was selected as a representative of Thailand's cultural rich and established crafts village who has been encountering the problem of losing of their own traditional craft identity due to their recent practice as OEM (Original Manufacture Equipment) enterprise, which is basically dominated by market demand. The benefit of this study will facilitate the future plan for empowering local human resources of the crafts communities of such a context with their awareness, direction and tools to retrieve and start to establish their own indigenous knowledge resource.

In terms of research method, participants design students and designers were grouped into three teams and worked with the local craftsmen and local children with each own team's strategy, which resembles the different kinds of real life interaction between local craftsmen and designers: (1) Maker and Designer in Thai Crafts Industry scenario (2) Master and Apprentice in old time craft learning scenario and (3) User and Designer in co-creation scenario. The methodology in each team is based on anthropological approach. The activities involving locals are mostly conducted in a participatory manner.

Eventhough the three teams started with the same preparatory method by learning step by step of Bangchaocha craft weaving basic from the locals, but with such different approaches, the result of exploring the traditional and indigenous knowledge are varied. However, 3 types of relationship are found crucial for Thailand's crafts communities as they can work together as an efficient mechanism to manage retrieval the local know-how.

Keywords : *Retrieving Local Wisdom, Communal Identity, Co-Creation, Design Process*

Background

The ASEAN has agreed to strengthen its competitive regional economic, one of the key prominent features is to develop strategies to engage and enhance the competitiveness of the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the region. The opening act of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) therefore will tremendously benefit all its member countries in term of economy, sovereignty, equality, and territorial integrity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). Nevertheless it has also stirred up their citizens, especially in the SMEs craft product sector, a strong feeling of national identity, as they require in developing a business strategy to maintain their cultural uniqueness for their goods. Since in the past, Southeast Asia region was occurred a territorial blur which made it diverse in compositions of their populations. Therefore many of ASEAN countries remain as multi-cultural society. A great varieties of ethnicities, the differences in religions and believes, the increasing and declining in migration, the diplomacy exchange, the colonization and the global trading network, all had shaped each ASEAN society to retain its own cultural practice and indigenous knowledge, while still share some similar daily and seasonal life in most communities (Owen et al, 2010).

Bangchaocha community, a sub-district in Ang Thong province, has long been popular in their bamboo basketworks. With a sophisticated form, finely details and quality, Bangchaocha basketworks were supplied as a supreme bestow for the king during Ayutthaya period. But as mentioned above, Bangchaocha bamboo basketwork is, in someway, blurred in its originality since it shares some craft characteristics with other central plain area of Thailand (Lisuwan, 1986). Though Bangchaocha villagers, from generation to generation, had produced supplementary income from basket making and as a main occupation for a few. Their indigenous knowledge in basketworks then had been evolved, from time to time, of its material availability, functions, forms, and techniques, to meet the growing needs of the modern living and trend.

Still, Bangchaocha crafts community could not resist the temptation of being a part of the global crafts commodity business scene. They enthusiastically playing their role as OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) for exported craft products to quite a few parts of the world: South East Asia, Japan and Northern America. To do so, the local identity on crafts and design including some of indigenous knowledge are somehow neglected in order to enhance the efficiency of their production line. As the matter of fact that the number of Bangchaocha craftsmen had also gradually reduced and frighteningly most of them were in their senior age of 60 years and older, their local craft wisdom is dully encountered a risk to be vanished.

Recently, Bangchaocha has been relied on the export market such as Japan who has put an order mainly on variations of colorful and refined ladies' handbags as for their kimono dress. Apart form that, they supply such the same products but with less quality to domestic markets for those consumers who fancy traditional-inspired design. In comparison, unlike those handicraft bags the authentically vernacular bamboo basketry crafts is considered rare in the domestic mid-range market. Such a traditionally vernacular craftwork, mostly utilitarian artifacts such as Kra-bung or rice container, is usually handed to elderly who are physically incapable of pursuing fine crafts.

Further, Modernization phenomenon is common to most of the provincial areas in Thailand including Bangchaocha. The consequential problems, which are relocation of the young generation to work in the bigger cities, the decline of agricultural profession, the replacement of hand-made agricultural-related daily artifacts by mass-produced commodities, have contributed to the change of local crafts production structure and the

lost of indigenous knowledge. When there were little need from locals, the remaining craftsmen has shifted to work for the outside markets, who dominate the types, styles, quality and price of the products. Consequently, craft-making community has adopted outsourcing and work force distribution strategy to their production line for the efficient time and quality control. As a result, the transfer of indigenous knowledge has been disrupted as a matters of fact that it is too time consuming to make crafts in the old way and actually there are not much younger generation want to pursue this career path. (Poonpol, 2004)

The recession in the popularity of craft-based products among Thai consumers is correspondingly occurred by the effects of globalization and capitalism. In other words, the phenomenon was a cultural evolution that had pushed the once dominant culture of domestic materialistic consumption into a residual culture, responding to the changing social, economic, technological, ideological and geographical contexts and conditions (Williams, 2005). Not long before, Thai villagers lived a completely self-sufficient economic life. People sustained families through multiple occupations, exchange, and sales. Artisans operated from a small workshop on a part-time basis. The villages were linked by markets, where people traded their crafted goods for items they could not themselves produce or that it was not worth their time to make (Owen et al, 2010). Once industrialization and international trade had permeated into the region, imported goods had replaced most of the local crafted products. Local consumers had developed their preference for most of household and daily lifestyle products, which made Bangchaocha bamboo basketry reduced in its popularity.

This study therefore attempts (1) to find out the method of retrieving the indigenous knowledge and cultural and artistic identity in Bangchaocha bamboo crafts through design thinking and activities, (2) to empower the local craftsmen in the dilemmic context of cultural-rich-yet-OEM-potentially-violated with the awareness of their own cultural root through design activities, and (3) to build up the once residual culture of domestic materialistic consumption to be as a dominant culture among Thai community. The investigation also elaborates on how such village craftsmen see and approach their communal identity for the purpose of commercialization. Further, how the involved stakeholders eg. locals and designers who have assigned to be in contact with crafts community for product development, value and utilize this local uniqueness is also observed.

Theoretical Context and Methodology

Inspired by the notion of Dominant, Residual and Emergent Cultural behaviors by Raymond William in Culture and Materialism (2005), Xiangyang Xin and Craig Vogel has suggested the relationship of those three in the form of Progression of Cultural Behaviors model (2006). While Dominant Cultural Behaviors is conformed to institutional and mainstream ideologies, Residual Cultural Behaviors are often rooted in the traditional and Emergent Cultural Behaviors are continually generated new behaviors.

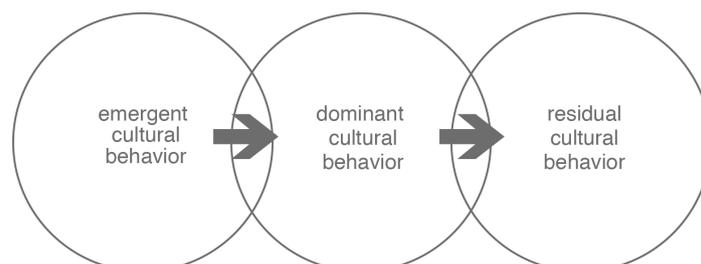


Figure 1: General Pattern of Cultural Behavior Progression

Source: Xin, X. and Vogel, C. (2006)

With In our study, crafts making is considered as a form of cultural activity, which also has its own path of evolution through a period of time, which seems to correspond with the Progression of Cultural Behaviors model. In search of possible retrieval mechanisms, we have set up our assumption on 3 indigenous knowledge stages we were going to explore: Dominant, Emergent and Residual based on the Progression of Cultural Behaviors model as followed.

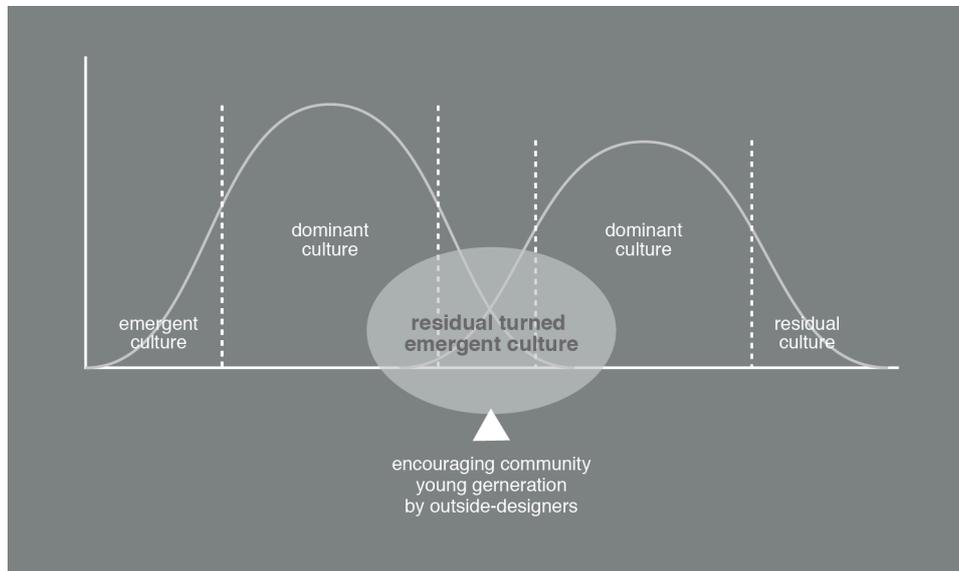


Figure 2: Residual-Turned-Emergent Cultural Evolution by Outside-Designers Stimulant
Source: Chuenrudeemol, W. (2011)

With Further, the local wisdom of basketry crafts of Bangchaocha lies in the process of craft making itself. As Michael Polanyi refers to as Tacit Knowledge, such a type of knowledge cannot be transferred of taught by words alone. Instead of formal descriptions, tacit knowledge can primarily be acquired by practical and personal contact between master and apprentice (Polanyi, 2002). This study is influenced by an anthropological approach, but a participatory design method used in most design practice is also utilized. Therefore the application of both methods produced the three different design scenarios as the research tool that speaks of the varied relationships between Bangchaocha local craftsmen and the participant designers: (1) master and apprentice in the craft knowledge transfer in the old time, (2) the equal role of maker and designer in the co-creation concept, and (3) maker and designer in the typical Thailand's OEM scenario. These preset design roles as the research strategy will beneficially articulate on how and in which different levels of access to indigenous knowledge can happen. Nevertheless, the collaborations mostly initiated by Thai government agencies, like elsewhere in the developing countries, supported the community in term of product introduction, finance and group management advisory, and make known the target market, but in the long run, the community need to self-sustain its business by introducing and fostering their young community members the invaluable of their indigenous knowledge and wisdom.

With this in mind, during the period of 5 months, the 3 groups of participant designers included the two groups of young 4th year Industrial Design students and another group of professional product and interior designers, each group has been assigned the same mission in developing the new bamboo basketry-technique-based products that conveyed the craft indigenous knowledge of Bangchaocha, in either ways of creative technique, form or story, self-sufficient lifestyle, sustainable-oriented product and marketing approaches. While the first group of Industrial Design students have imitated the role of apprentices, learning closely with the crafts master before starting to create their own design, the second group of Industrial Design students have teamed up with the 5th

graded students from local school in their co-creation project, as a senior friend who came in once a week for giving them fun activities during the 8-weeks design project. The 5th graded students was an appropriate yet challenge candidate since they have already possessed their bamboo basic weaving skills since the school provided them a cultural study course. The third group of professional designer has pursued their role of outside designers working with the craft makers as most typical Thai OEM scenario.

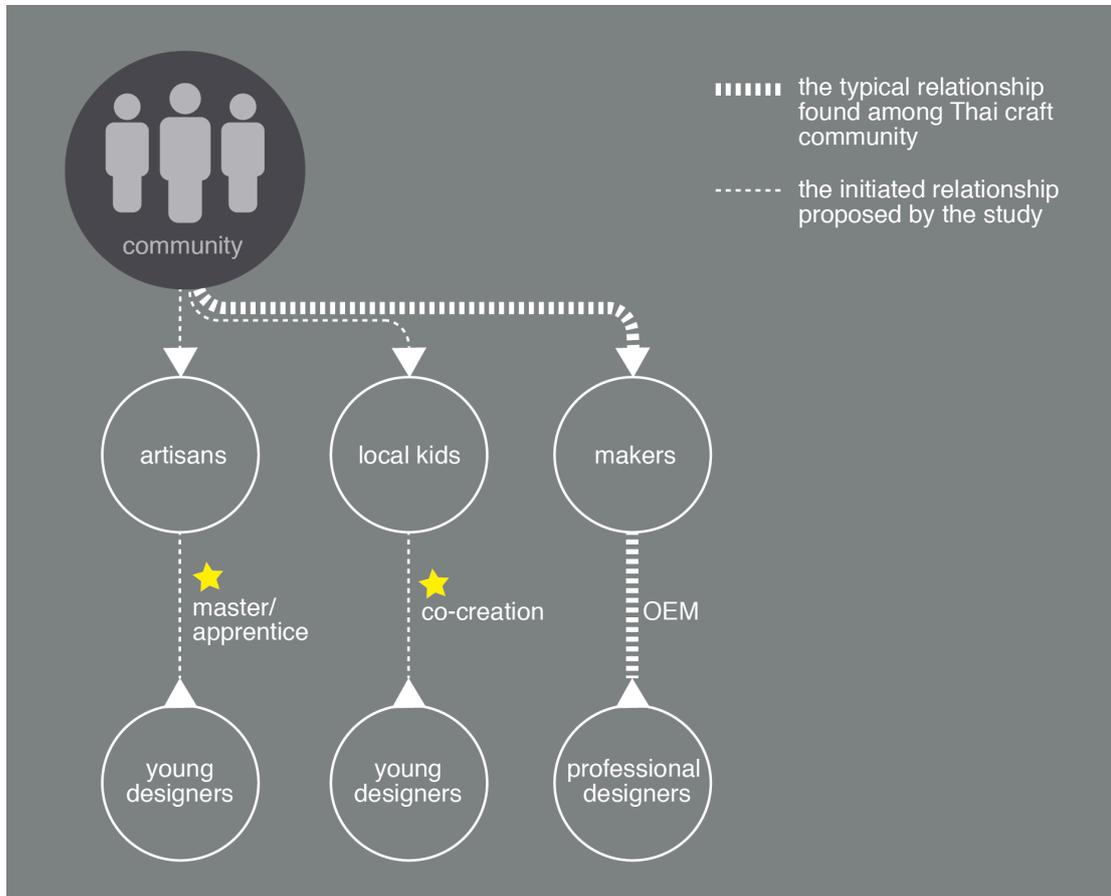


Figure 3: The Three Models in Retrieving Bangchaocha's Indigenous Knowledge

Source: Chuenrudeemol, W. (2011)

With the initiated concept of how to preserve Bangchaocha craft indigenous knowledge and how to render a well-captured spirit of Bangchaocha identity into a commercialize-successful product, the three groups of designers had participated in a village survey and museum visit to acquaint themselves with the community and likewise. The first group of the young industrial design students had employed an ethnographic observation, a strong grounding in both verbal and visual domains of experience to provide empathy from immersion into a particular context. The preset circumstance of alienation was intendedly set between the young students and local craftsmen to create a cross-intention learning atmosphere. The students had also required to slightly challenge the craftsmen in experimenting with the materials, form and technique, which had varied influences on their design thinking.

The second group of young students whom approached the 5th grade local school kids had set up a series of edutainment workshop, mission to find insight story of the community and how the fellows perceive and think of their local wisdom. The friendliness of young design students, the informal style of workshop, the fun, creative and easy activities, help ease those local children in participating the activities. While the design students have exercised their learning with the locals, the third group of professional designers from different background have hopped in and out the village since they had

limited time. This circumstance was already controlled the imitated OEM relationship between the designers and locals, a one-way design interaction. The local craftsmen task here was only produced prototypes according to the designers.

Results

1) Design Outcomes

All the three groups of design outcomes are quite varied in term of design intention and marketing strategic planning. With the first group of industrial design students approaching the craftsmen as master-apprentice model, they had their first time experience living with the villagers, which allowed them to understand the villagers and share their empathy. These had set their design intention, together with the assistance of the craftsmen, in expanding the craftsmen's existing bamboo handbag product lines, which the craft group leader had seen the potential in ladies fashion handbag market. Therefore the design output from the master-apprentice collaboration was a practical commercializable yet undifferentiated product. While some other students in the group had set their design intention in reviving the traditional bamboo crafts of Bangchaocha to fit with the current consumer lifestyle. By adapting the old rice and fish containers to be home decorative items, they altered the original functions, forms, color scheme, but still maintain the significant weaving pattern. These had resulted in an unexpected craft design yet still familiar to the consumers, which made them easily to be a popular line of products.

The design outcomes from the co-creation between the design students and local school children was inspired from these young children's imagination. Most of the finished works were initiated from the design activities occurred in class: keeping diary, wish-list drawing, paper-model making, and story telling, all activities related to their daily life routine. Like most of the co-creation project, the young children partook their roles as product users, helping the design students in forming up their initial design concept. Since the interactions between these two stakeholders were very spontaneous and too improbable to belief. On the other hand, the design students had experienced a slightly uncomfortable reaction as they felt they were not in-control of the whole design process, which most designers usually expect. Though they were blissful when they saw their younger friends relishing their beautiful children-friendly craft products.

As the third group of professional designers comprised of designers from different background, ranged from a branding strategic designer, a consumer product designer, an interior designer, and an architect, the design outcomes of this group were reflected on individual designer's expertise and personal interest. And as they were set as an outsider designer, their craft designs were quite fresh and challenge since they had less preconception in the limitation of craft process. In result, some of their craft designs were not directly related in building economic value, but as supporting scheme and facilitating tools, that provide the community a branding strategy as well as offer craft-lover customers a do-it-yourself safety knife for slicing bamboo bark. While some craft products are designed to cater target customers, some designed craft from this group are intendedly designed for communal use, which will truly benefit people of the community.

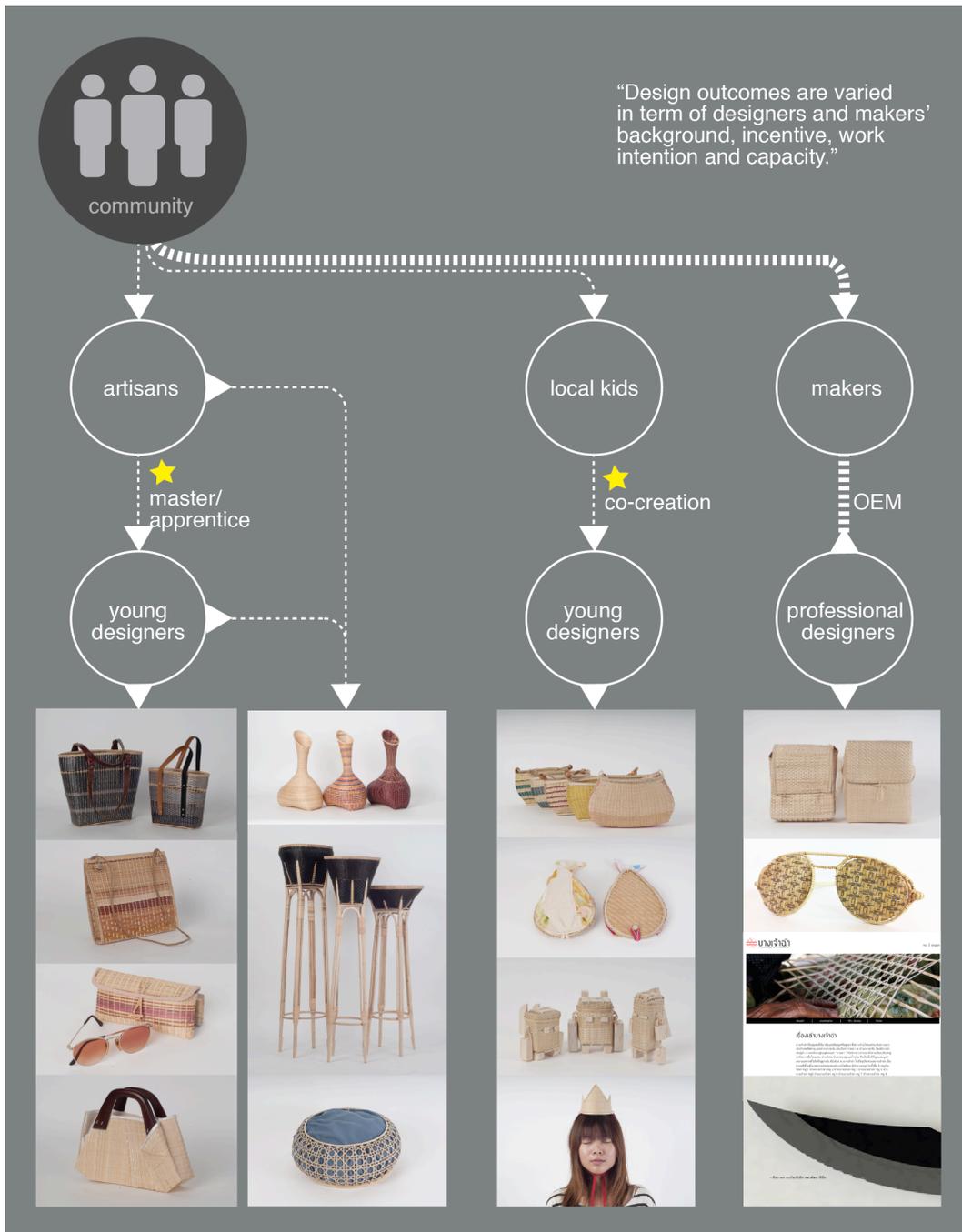


Figure 4: The Design Outcomes from Three Different Models in Retrieving Bangchaocha's Indigenous Knowledge

Source: Chuenrudeemol, W. (2011)

2) Lesson Learnt

For design students, participating in this study tremendously gave them opportunities to learn from the real world. By bringing the two groups of people with different background, their alienation to each other could turn out to be an eye-opening experience and become powerful creative resources through the synergy of ideas, mix and match working style with the open-ended expectation, rather than goal-oriented solidified solution. In essence, design students were actually explored their contemporary product design theories with craftsmen's existing indigenous basketry techniques. The process was truly collaborative, one in which students were able to materialize their design intentions through a real understanding craft material and technique while village craftsmen were encouraged to

apply their craft skills to functions and forms made by students that were outside of tradition and convention.

The project had challenge the community in a constructive way. Craftsmen, local chief and officers, local children, all realized not only in their potential and creation capability, but they also aware of their invaluable local wisdom. While villagers need to prioritize their source of subsistence, they finally also realize the importance in sustaining their valuable craft wisdom. Therefore, community craft product development should balance well between the aim to creatively commercialize and to effectively preserving their local wisdom. The village craftsmen also mentioned of the way they had absorbed some design knowledge during the project. They learned that to preserve local wisdom can be done in two ways, either preserve or develop from the old, by little by little altered the size and proportion, refined the form and colors, only to match with their target customers.

Discussions

1) Retrieving Craft Wisdom

people		craft value	
		community members	outside-designers
artistic value	creative value	community craftsmen explore artistic value	knowledge transfer from local craftsmen
		community carry on their local wisdom by using locally-made products, initiating local events within the village, building community strength from within	help supporting community activities with all level of community members
		community self-reliance business	supporting in product development, trend, and packaging

Figure 5: Crafts Value in Relation to Indigenous Knowledge Retrieval Activities

Source: Chuenrudeemol, W. (2011)

There are multi levels in accessing indigenous craft knowledge. In each level, there will be different incentives for stakeholders in order to explore and retrieve their indigenous knowledge and crafts know-how. The Dominant Cultural elements of crafts largely create direct economic value to the community. It is vulnerable to changes and the domination of the marketing trend. Therefore, the search and selection for indigenous authenticity in Dominant Cultural elements are crucial. Emergent and Residual Cultural elements of crafts are obviously potential areas to be explored. For Residual Cultural elements, how to help the community retrieved their own culture after their natural cultural decline to become dominant again need the outsider work as an outside respirator to accelerate the process. Parallel with desk research on local art and craft history, learning by doing in the master/apprentice fashion with the local craftsmen can be conducted. If this opportunity is regularly arranged, the local craftsmen can practice their crafts skills and finally enhance it to the level that they can create true artistic value to the products. For Emergent Cultural element of crafts, designers can enhance crafts social and cultural value by

contributing their creativity with the new perspective on local socio cultural context to capture the unseen indigenous crafts know-how and even establish new set of crafts cultural artifacts for the needs of the locals. Therefore, designers' role is not only to activate the new cycle of design creation based on indigenous wisdom in collaboration with the craftsmen, but also to trigger local craftsmen and community in several ways. However, if in the community exist the enthusiastic younger generation who is interested in preserving their indigenous knowledge, therefore there is no need that outside designer should intervene at all because their culture will evolve by their own natural course. The outsider can only help with public relation and keep the closed-looped connection running. Ideally it is the task of the community itself to retrieve their own declining cultural identity to become dominant again.

2) Mutual Benefits

Thai society is based on mutual reliance and cooperation, for example, the act of barn-raising (in a form of rice harvesting). Revenue and earnings received had never been problematic as labor and outcomes were unmeasured (Petchmak, 2004). Nevertheless, participating in this local economic creativity project, the main goal of community members was geared towards revenue and profit sharing. In order to achieve the collaboration from community, a mutual benefits is considered to be very important factor. Take the teachers at Wat Yang Thong primary school case for example, when the project first started, the school lacked enough teachers to run the class. The project had helped providing extra teachers to help teaching the class. Another example is a community's need for a new design since they sought to expand their product line for wider target customers. As a result, the project had helped providing the new marketable design for their bamboo handbag category. However, the mutual benefit issue needs to be cautiously and sensitively handled. Especially when the community is lack of social strength, conflicts can easily happen among the members and with the outsiders.

3) A Self-Reliance Community

Since in the studied community existed a generation gap where the older generation carried on the task of weaving and keeping the community economic run, yet there are none of the younger generation to prolong this indigenous knowledge. In fear that their knowledge will become eventually extinct because the newer generation overlook the knowledge because of its unattractiveness in term of economic return and career excitement. In short, they have underestimated their cultural intrinsic value. The designer is acting as a bonding agent between these two generations of the community, as the indigenous knowledge retriever from the older generation and the aspiration of the local younger generation. They solely work as an outside mechanism to accelerate forward the process, at a certain point when the community is ready, they should be replaced by the local younger generation who are trained to replace the outside designers' task.

Similar strategy has appeared with the case of "Hub System" in Indonesia. A product designer, Joshua Simandjuntak has proposed the model of sustaining craft indigenous knowledge whilst embracing the new design. In crafts villages in Indonesia, it is common that outside designers always come into the village with their enthusiasm to produce their design with technical support of the local craftsmen. After their departure once the prototypes are made, there is always be a 'vacuum' of a community's design aspiration. With the intermittent stimuli as such, it has resulted as unsustainable progress among any stakeholders.

The 'Hub' is, therefore, created as the actual sharing place within the community where local craftsmen and stepping in designers can share and exchange know-how and ideas on design utilizing indigenous crafts techniques. The knowledge acquiring facilities are equipped for craftsmen searching for knowledge from outside, while collaborative working space is also provided for designers to learn the hands-on techniques from the craftsmen. The objectives of this system is to prompt the local craftsmen to regularly practice and share their indigenous crafts know-how through the interaction with the outsiders and in return, the new and fresh design creation of these 'Designers-in-residence' will be expected to trigger local's design perspective and also be accumulatively archived. Even though the designers have left the community but the system and knowledge will be remained and supposed to constantly drive the new cycle of learning (Simandjuntak, 2010).

Furthermore, the priority should be given to the utilizing the indigenous knowledge and local narratives and inspiration, rather than market demand if one wants to develop the local commerce sustainably. The proper marketing channels can be sought after once the new indigenous-base products are created. Knowledge transfer and accumulation are necessarily conducted in parallel with foreseeing and understanding the potential markets.

Conclusion

Skill-based know-how can only be learned by practice. Learning in social and cultural context is almost as important as the indigenous craft knowledge itself as it is the extensive learning towards real understanding of those local wisdoms. With respectful approach to the localness, the research integrated all stakeholders from the community to outside source to partake in the learning, so as to achieve the mutual goal of retrieving the local identity and cultural asset.

Because in the ever changing world economic where the temptation of the mass, fast paced development and economic lure is somehow hard to withstand by the smaller society, therefore an indigenous society need to adopt a effective modern mechanism in this case introduced by the outside source to counterbalance between their age-old cultural identity and the modern marketing demand. So that their society can develop in sustainable way therefore their cultural identity can be retrieved, respected, valued, and even elevated.

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