

'Design Promises: the Case Study of Bangchaocha Bamboo Basketry Community'

BOONLAOR, Nanthana; lecturer | King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand

CHUENRUDEEMOL, Woranooch; lecturer | King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand

Cultural Identity, Design Intervening Craft Process, Co-Creation, Cultural Products

This paper is a study on how design improves local craft products of the Bangchaocha community in order to compete in market arenas. Based on the conceptual framework of the *model of culture* proposed by Spencer-Oatey (1999), a series of design interventions were conducted to help designers and locals investigate and identify Bangchaocha community's unique cultural identity. It is aimed to set up the environment and stimuli for local craftsmen to search for a totally new craft-breakthrough product. The local craftsmen, who teamed up with design students, were introduced to several hands-on design workshops that challenged and developed their creativity and artistic know-how. Another group of design students were paired up with the local children. The collaboration between these young imaginative minds and design students was intended to create an inspiring atmosphere for both participants. The design outcomes from the collaboration resulted in a series of new wicker products that not only express a strong cultural identity, but also created social participation and engagement among the community members. The design activities clearly strengthened the locals' confidence in utilizing their own cultural identity in creating unique craft products that open up new ways of looking for inspiration. The project ultimately encouraged the entire crafts community to explore a whole other set of options of product categories and forms.

1. Bangchaocha Community

1.1 Bangchaocha's Unique Artifacts

Bangchaocha community, a sub-district in Ang Thong province, was selected as the research study area. It is one of Thailand's historic craft communities recognized for its unique folk wisdom of their bamboo wicker products. During Thailand's Ayutthaya period, Bangchaocha's wicker works had reached its peak as a supreme bestowal for the royal court. Bangchaocha's well-known wicker artifacts are deeply rooted in the community's rice harvesting and fishing history- as demonstrated in products like the Kra-Bung - a rice container, Kra-Jad - a multipurpose container, and Ta-Kra - a common basket of old time. With their sophisticated forms and fine detail and craftsmanship, these unique utilitarian artifacts not only possess aesthetic value but also demonstrate practical functions, as seen below in figure 1.



Figure 1. Kra-Bung – a rice container, Kra-Jad – a multipurpose container, Ta-Kra – a common basket (photo by Woranooch Chuenrudeemol).

The Bangchaocha weaving artifacts are typically constructed with a rectangular or hexagonal bottom base. They all exhibit simple vertical-horizontal pattern, spliced with small vertical wood spine at the corners for rigidity, and finished at the opening with an intricate traditional rattan tightening technique called "Jung Nang".

Kra-Bung and Kra-Jad are both multipurpose containers of various sizes and shapes. The variety of shapes corresponds to their various intended functions. Kra-Bung, the container with the taller and convex shape, is used for storing small rice grain or other seeds and also doubles as a volume measurement vessel. With its inward-curved weaving structure, it allows some air ventilation to minimize moisture collection and to protect against weevil. While Kra-Jad, the basket with the wider and shorter bowl-like, concave shape, is used as a vessel to store/display fruits or food in the short term before consumption. It can also be used for drying things under strong sunlight. With its bigger diameter and wider proportion, which can be comfortably braced against the hip/waist, local ladies can use them for carrying things to temple or market, as seen in figure 2 below. Cultural products also come with a story. In this case, local gentlemen would weave these bamboo artifacts in order to woo their mates, as these products symbolized a dexterity, skill, and ability to lead and support a family (Lisuwan 2010). More specifically, the rims at the opening of the Kra-Bung basket is finished with an intricate rattan tightening technique called “Jung Nang”, which translates to “weaving the (bamboo) line that will lead her into love”. Thus, the more beautifully intricate this basket rim detail is, the more enticing the basket will be in leading the woman into his love.

In their construction, these Bangchaocha artifacts demonstrate strength, durability, and functionally unique forms derived from local wisdom – one with a deep understanding of material properties and creative form-making inherently linked to intended usage. Their execution and detail is also powerfully rooted in cultural and familial beliefs and attitudes.



Figure 2. Local ladies carrying their Kra-Jad to the temple (photo by Woranooch Chuenrudeemol).

1.2 Bangchaocha Craft Business

In the past, Bangchaocha 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 not worth their time to make (Owen et al 2010). Once industrialization and international trade had permeated the region, imported goods had replaced most of the local craft products. Local consumers had developed new preferences for household and daily lifestyle products, which made Bangchaocha bamboo basketry business decline in its popularity.

However, in the year 2000, Thai government launched a series of policies to encourage sustainable economic development - one of which placed an importance on creating craft-based product manufacturing entrepreneur. One of the most outstanding of these schemes is called OTOP - One Tambon (subdistrict) One Product, inspired by Japanese original model called OVOP or One Village One Product concept, introduced in 2001. Its objective is to encourage local communities to be self-reliant - by using local resources, both natural and human, to develop their range of products, of which traditional craft-based item is one of the major categories. However, the scheme fell short of its objective, as local product designs did not match market demand, mostly to lack of proper market research. Also the nature of craft-based production, one that is based on the crafting of each individual product by hand, did not lend itself to the same speeds and uniformity of factory-made products, and thus, fell into another OTOP product category that needed, but did not receive, this special attention.

Therefore, during 2006-2007 campaign, a plan introduced by the Department of Industrial Promotion to raise the production standard, were introduced along with another significant scheme led by Department of Export Promotion, which focused encouraging manufacturers to produce global

products based on thorough understanding in global consumers needs. The momentum of these key policies has still influenced craft-based product enterprise, as well as artisans' practices.

Similar to the other communities whose traditional heritage of craftsmanship have high commercial value, Bangchaocha community could not resist the temptation of being a part of global craft-as-commodity business scene. They enthusiastically play their role as OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) for exported craft products to quite a few parts of the world: South East Asia, Japan and North America. To do so, the local identity on crafts and design, including some indigenous knowledge are somehow neglected in order to increase the efficiency of their craft production line. As a result Bangchaocha producers increasingly were forced by necessity to neglect their historical vernacular craftwork. Their indigenous basketworks processes has necessarily evolved (and in many cases *de*-volved) due to material availability constraints, preferred usages/forms/techniques that needed to be streamlined for modern living and catered towards contemporary trends.

Recently, Bangchaocha has relied on export markets such as Japan, whose traders have ordered mainly un-original variations of colorful and refined ladies' handbags to be carried with kimono dress. Apart from that, they also supply much of the same products (but with less quality) to domestic markets for local consumers who fancy traditionally-inspired design. In comparison, unlike those fancy handicraft bags, the authentically vernacular bamboo craftworks, mostly utilitarian artifacts, such as Kra-bung or rice container are considered rare and not gaining popularity in the domestic mid-range market. The decreasing popularity of craft-based products among Thai consumers corresponds with the effects of globalization and capitalism. In other words, the phenomenon was a cultural evolution that has 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).

As Bangchaocha craft business has faced adversity in many ways, thrive in sustaining their indigenous knowledge, while constantly developing their local craft identity, to keep up with the markets. They are also confronted with a significant drop in human capital and natural resources. The modernization phenomenon is common to most provincial areas in Thailand, including Bangchaocha. The consequential problems, including the relocation of the young generation to work in the bigger cities, the decline of agricultural profession, and the replacement of hand-made agricultural-related daily artifacts by mass-produced commodities, have contributed to drastic changes in the local craft production structure, eventually resulting in the loss of indigenous knowledge. With little demand from locals, the remaining Bangchaocha craftsmen have shifted to work for the outside marketers, who predetermine the types, styles, quality and price of "best-seller" products with little concern for preserving/developing indigenous craft knowledge. Consequently, this craft-making community has also adopted a labor-outsourcing strategy for their craft production line to increase efficiency, as well as time and quality control. They have been forced to do so, in part, due to the loss of a younger generation, disenchanted with traditional craft culture, who want to pursue more modern career paths in the big cities. As a result, the transfer of indigenous knowledge has been disrupted because it is too time-consuming to make craft in the old way and fight of the newer generation towards alternative career options (Poonpol 2004).

2. Understand Cultural Product and Its Value in Contemporary Market

In the unavoidable stream of globalization, cultural identity, especially tradition-related, is considered as precious assets of the nation. As Adhi Nugraha (2010) stated, tradition has become not only a 'counter-culture' tool against the dominant culture, but also a resource for value creation in today's global competition geared towards creative economy. While the *economic* value of commercialized cultural products are simply measured by their business success and the dynamics of economic activities in the supply chain, (as in the case of Bangchaocha's wicker products created for foreign market) the *cultural* value embedded in such products is more difficult to estimate. Looking at craft vs. industrial products, Nugraha (2010) stated that craft artifacts bring along the value that tie with social engagement, the cultural recognition and 'human touch'. However, the low volume from its hand-made production probably makes its economic value unguaranteed. This assumption is reversely applied to industrial products.

Therefore, the concern for social engagement, cultural recognition and human touch become the significant design criteria that help establish the design activities and craft design directions for the design conceptualization process. The strategies set up in this project aim not only to sustain these

social and cultural values within the community, but also to establish a good balance with their economic value. With these goals in mind, the researchers have designed the following research methodology:

3. The Cultural Product Design Process

The manifestations of culture at different levels of depth adapted by Helen Spencer-Oatey (1999) proposed that the holistic view of culture can be explained by a stratify layers of sphere.

As seen in Figure 3, Moving from the outer tangible layer to the inner intangible core, we have: 1) artifacts, rituals & behaviors, 2) skills, institutions & systems, 3) beliefs, attitudes, and conventions, and 4) basic assumptions and values. With the aim to set up design activities that create unique and marketable Bangchaocha cultural craft products, this research attempts to map out Spencer-Oatey's model of culture in the product design process, which itself is comprised of four phrases:

A) Initiation & Analysis – to understand the content, issues and goal, B) Conceptualization – to generate design direction and concept, C) Finalization – to elaborate design details, D) Evaluation – to analyze the design in terms of usage, production, and market feasibility.

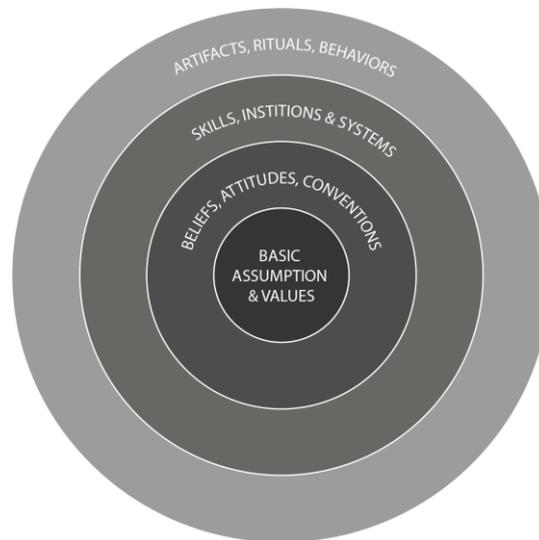


Figure 3. The Onion Diagram, the Manifestations of Culture at Different Layers of Depth adapted from Helen Spencer-Oatey Ed. (1999). Source: Adapted from G. Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991, and F. Trompenaars and C. Hampden-Turner, *Riding the Waves of Culture*, London: Nicholas Brealey, 1997.

Therefore the identification of Bangchaocha's cultural elements activity is embedded in the first design process phase of Initiation & Analysis. With the initial concept of what and how to embed Bangchaocha's cultural identity into a commercially successful product, the two groups of participants, both design students and the locals, were set up. The first group is comprised of university design students teamed up with 5th grade students (who themselves possess basic basket-weaving skills) from a local Bangchaocha school. The groups worked together to contemplate, explore, and isolate the core concepts of the Bangchaocha community's values, as seen through the eyes of the 5th grade students. In this case, the process allowed the children to see and value their own bamboo wicker products/tradition in the context of a modern world. With the researchers leading the way, both groups of participants were encouraged to transmit these newfound visions and attitudes into developing new products via a series of creative thinking and design activities. The resulting products of the collaboration are shown in figure 4 below.

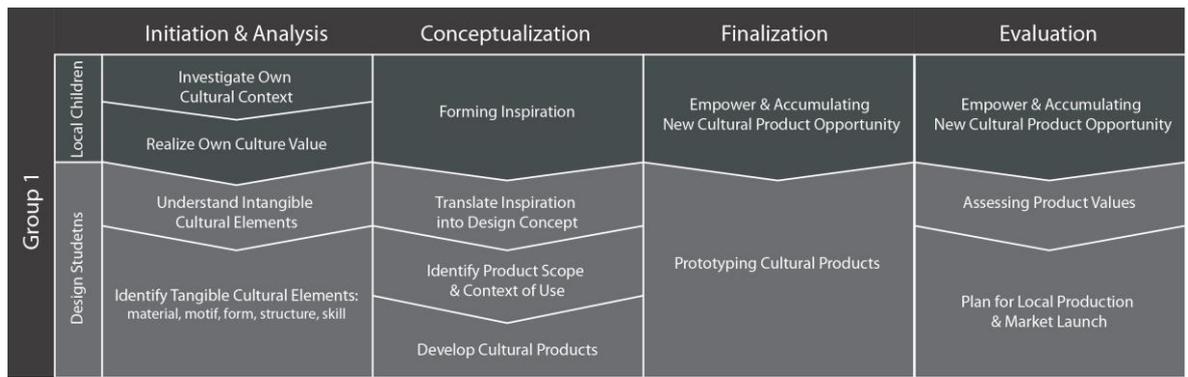


Figure 4. Design Activities For Group 1: Design Students and Local Children (Diagram by Woranooch Chuenrudeemol).

While the second group of design students and local craftsmen are participating in a workshop type of activity, mission to develop new bamboo craft products that convey tangible cultural elements of Bangchaocha community, for example, its creative weaving and structuring technique, its artistic and inventive form, its sophisticated details and memorable story, which matching with the contemporary domestic market. The second group of design students then imitated the role of apprentices, learning closely with the craft masters before set off to create their own designs as seen below in figure 5.

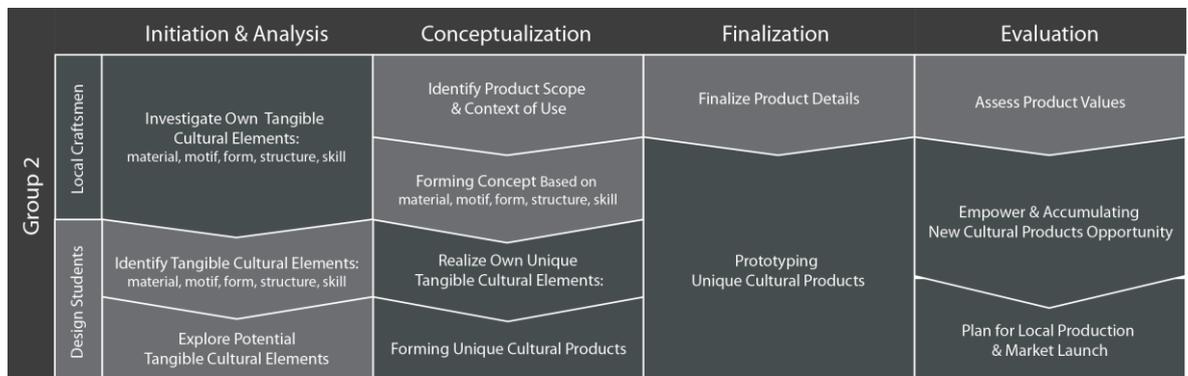


Figure 5. Design Activities For Group 2: Design Students and Local Craftsmen (Diagram by Woranooch Chuenrudeemol).

4. Design Outcomes, Evaluation & Discussion

4.1 Design Outcomes

The final design outcomes have apparently employed community's cultural value in both tangible and intangible forms. The collaboration designs between design students and local children are functional products with narration about local lifestyle. As seen in the figure 6 below, the fish-shaped pouch reflects local children's daily routine and relationship with water culture, while the robot piggy bank shows that even containers containing monetary units (coins) can be handmade and sustainable. Whereas the design student/5th grader collaboration resulted in functional products with narration, the collaboration works between design students and local craftsmen resulted in the series of purely *craft* driven pieces. The designers and makers exemplified the well-known traditional artifacts such as Kra-Bung and Kra-Jad. They maintain the traditional form and its making technique, and reinterpret the new usage scenario, as seen in figure 7.



Figure 6. Design Outcomes from Group 1: Design Students and Local Children Group (Photo by Woranooch Chuenrudeemol).



Figure 7. Design Outcomes from Group 2: Design Students and Local Craftsmen Group (Photo by Woranooch Chuenrudeemol).

4.2 Design Process in Search For Cultural identity

Seeing design activities as a catalyst for stimulating perspective on crafts tradition, the most important stage of the collaboration is the investigation and realization stages. Those activities are crucial to the locals to help them in recognizing their own valuable culture and seeing their tradition in a different way. Via the design process, they also slowly understand how to reinterpret those cultural elements to create a more contemporary craft product.

The demonstration of how to transfer the intangible into tangible cultural elements lays in stage two of conceptualization phase, from intangible inspiration or design concept to two-dimensional sketch and

finally to three-dimensional mock up, help enhance the locals' comprehension of the design process that deal with their cultural identity.

4.3 A Strategy to Build Self Reliance Community

A generation gap existed in the studied community where the older generation carried on the task of weaving and keeping the community economy running and none of the younger generation seemed interested in prolonging this indigenous knowledge. The older people feared that their knowledge would become eventually extinct because of the younger generation's abandonment of a local village industry that promised low economic returns and little career excitement. In short, they underestimated their cultural intrinsic value. The designer acted as a bonding agent between these two generations in the community, as the indigenous knowledge retriever from the older generation and the inspiration of the local younger generation. They solely work as an outside mechanism to accelerate the process, and 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 indigenous craft knowledge whilst embracing new design. In crafts villages in Indonesia, outside designers commonly come into the village with enthusiasm to produce their design with technical support of the local craftsmen. After their departure once the prototypes are made, there exists a 'vacuum' of a community's design inspiration. With such intermittent stimuli, it has resulted as in unsustainable progress among any stakeholders.

The 'Hub' is, therefore, created as the actual sharing place within the community where local craftsmen and visiting 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 craftsmen. The objectives of this system is to prompt local craftsmen to regularly practice and share their indigenous crafts know-how through interaction with outsiders, and in return, the new and fresh design creations of these 'Designers-in-residence' will trigger local design perspective and also be accumulatively archived. Even though the designers leave the community, the system and knowledge will remain to constantly drive the new cycle of learning (Simandjuntak 2010).

Furthermore, priority should be given to utilizing 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 once the new cultural products are created. Knowledge transfer and accumulation are necessarily conducted in parallel with foreseeing and understanding potential markets.

5. 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 extensive learning towards real understanding of local wisdom. With a respectful approach to the locals, the research integrated all stakeholders from the community 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 economy, where the temptation of mass, fast-paced development and economic lure are hard to withstand by smaller societies, an indigenous society needs to adopt an effective modern mechanism. In this case such a mechanism was introduced by the outside source of young designers to balance a community's age-old cultural identity with modern marketing demands. In doing so, it shows how society can start to develop in a sustainable manner and how a culture's identity can be retrieved, respected, valued, and even elevated.

Acknowledgment

The researchers would like to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand; Wat Yang Thong primary school, Bangchaocha subdistrict, Angthong province; Ms. Siriras Singharan, the community coordinator; Assistant Professor Manote Kongkanan; Ms. Apirom Kongkanan; and KMUTT 4th year industrial design students for their contribution to the study.

References

- LISUWAN, V. 2010. *Thai Basketworks Dictionary*: 61. Muang Boran Publishing, Thailand.
- NUGRAHA, A. 2010. Searching a Tool for Sustaining Tradition: Indonesian Cases. In: FABRIZIO C.; CARLO V. & JUN Z. (Ed.) *Conference Proceedings Volume 1: The LeNs Conference on Sustainability in Design: NOW!*: 335-343. Green Leaf Publishing, UK.
- OWEN, N. G. 2010. *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History Edited by Norman G. Owen (et al.)*. NUS Press, Singapore.
- POONPOL, D. 2004. *Local Arts and Crafts and Production as Influenced by Cultural Ecology*. Unpublished Monograph, Institute of Research and Development, Silpakorn University, Thailand.
- SIMANDJUNTAK, J. 2010. The Crafts of Indonesia: The Implementation of Design in Wood Carving and Rattan Furniture Crafts. Seminar: *Creativity and Self-Reliance Craft Development in Asia*, 9th June 2010, Thailand.
- SPENCER-OATEY, H. (Ed.) 1999. *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapports Through Talk Across Cultures* Edited by Helen Spencer-Oatey: 5. Continuum International Publishing, UK.
- WILLIAMS, R. 2005. *Culture and Materialism*. Verso, UK.

About the author(s)

Nanthana Boonlaor is a lecturer at Industrial Design Program, School of Architecture and Design, King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thonburi. Her expertise is in the field of socio-cultural qualitative research for design. She has contributed her research experience towards a range of product development and strategic design projects: consumer products, branding strategy for community products, community product development as well as personal textiles arts projects. <nanthana.kul@kmutt.ac.th>

Woranooch Chuenrudeemol is currently teaching at Industrial Design Program, School of Architecture and Design, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. Her expertise includes socio-cultural research for craft product design, design collaboration between education and community sector, SMEs business & branding strategy, and brand attribution. <woranooch.lee@kmutt.ac.th>