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Editorial

Art as an

Urban Lifeline:

Mental Well-Being in Times of Crisis and Conflict

Bussakorn Binson⁺ Executive Director

Cities across the world are increasingly defined by pressure – conflict, disaster, displacement, economic uncertainty, and a growing sense of social fragmentation. These forces shape not only the physical fabric of the city but also the inner lives of its residents. As urban populations endure chronic stress, fear, and emotional fatigue, the question of how cities support mental well-being has become urgent. In this context, art has emerged not as cultural decoration, but as a profound psychological lifeline: a medium through which individuals can process trauma, reconnect with their communities, and recover their sense of humanity.

The emotional volatility of urban life is well documented. Even in stable times, city living exposes individuals to elevated stressors – noise, crowding, insecurity, precarity, and the erosion of social networks. In moments of crisis, these pressures intensify dramatically. People often lack language for their distress; even when words exist, they may feel unsafe or too overwhelmed to speak. Art offers a way through this silence. Whether through drawing, movement, music, or collective creative rituals, artistic expression helps reduce stress, regulate emotions, and foster connection among diverse groups of people (Stuckey and Nobel 2010).

Today, we see cities relying on art-based interventions as informal yet powerful networks of care. After natural disasters, community murals help residents reclaim streets scarred by loss. In conflict-affected neighborhoods, community music-making rebuilds trust and restores a sense of hope, especially among young people who have grown up in environments marked by fear (Jones and McFerran 2020). In schools, art activities help children express anxiety that they cannot articulate verbally. In hospitals and shelters, simple creative practices allow individuals to release tension stored in the body and to reconnect with their own emotional rhythms.

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Research consistently shows that shared creative activities create belonging and emotional safety – two conditions essential for mental recovery. Group singing, for instance, has been shown to strengthen social bonds, improve confidence, and sustain psychological well-being across age groups (Clift and Hancox 2010). This matters profoundly in cities where isolation and fragmentation are rising. Art not only brings people together; it restores the sense that healing is possible.

In disaster and emergency contexts, art-based interventions play a strategic role. They provide non-verbal channels for trauma release and stabilization at times when communities are overwhelmed and formal mental-health services are stretched thin. A growing body of international evidence shows that creative arts programmes support emotional recovery after disasters, enabling individuals to regulate fear, make meaning of traumatic events, and reconnect with others who share similar experiences (Thompson and Neale 2016). These interventions are cost-effective, culturally adaptable, and capable of mobilizing local participation – qualities that conventional services often lack.

For cities, the implications are clear. If mental well-being is essential to urban resilience, then art must be recognized as part of the urban mental-health infrastructure. This begins with integrating art-based approaches into schools, community centres, hospitals, emergency shelters, and municipal disaster preparedness plans. Cities could develop “creative emergency response teams” – artists, therapists, musicians, cultural workers – trained to support communities during crises. Mobile art units, public art healing hubs, and participatory creative programmes could function alongside formal services to provide emotional first aid during and after emergencies.

Art also strengthens what might be called the “emotional commons” of the city. Public creative spaces – festivals, murals, interactive installations, and community performances – create opportunities for collective expression that counteract fear, loneliness, and division. Cities that invest in these shared cultural ecosystems not only enhance their aesthetic identity; they cultivate resilience, empathy, and social cohesion.

As the world becomes more unpredictable – with climate instability, political conflict, and social anxiety affecting millions – the need for culturally grounded, accessible mental-health strategies has never been clearer. Art provides precisely this: a way to bear witness to suffering, transform pain into expression, and rebuild the bonds that crisis tries to break. More importantly, it reminds us that even in moments of extreme tension, the human capacity for creativity remains one of our most powerful tools for survival.

As JUCR moves into its new online chapter, this editorial is a call for deeper inquiry into how art can help cities endure, adapt, and heal. The journal will continue to support research that bridges culture, community practice, and the lived experiences of urban residents. In a world of conflict and uncertainty, art is not a luxury. It is a lifeline – and cities must learn to embrace its transformative power.

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Creative City Making as a Theoretical Research Practice

by Using Soft Systems Methodology

Salfitrie Maryunani,⁺ Togar Simatupang⁺⁺ & Isti Mirzanti³ (Indonesia)

Abstract

This study proposes a novel conceptual framework for creative city development that integrates cultural and economic perspectives, moving beyond the traditional singular focus of existing literature. It identifies three core variables – culture, creativity, and the creative economy – within a balanced model. Using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a structuring tool, the framework conceptualizes these interrelations within a complex urban system. Its originality is demonstrated through a design for application in Bandung, Indonesia, an underexplored context, providing a foundation for empirical validation. The paper concludes with actionable activities for implementation, offering a comprehensive tool for integrated diagnosis and planning by researchers and policymakers.

Keywords: Creative City, Creative Economy, Creativity, Culture, Framework, Soft Systems Methodology

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the 'creative city' has emerged as a dominant paradigm for urban development, seen by policymakers as a pathway to economic resilience, cultural vitality, and global competitiveness (Landry, 2008; Florida, 2002). For Indonesia, this is not merely an academic trend. With several cities like Bandung, Pekalongan, and Ambon joining the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), the national and local governments have made significant investments in branding and policies aimed at fostering creativity. The underlying promise is that this focus will lead to tangible improvements in urban welfare, economic growth, and sustainable development.

However, this global enthusiasm often overlooks a critical underlying issue: there is no clear, operationalised understanding of what constitutes a 'creative city,' leading to potential policy missteps. Cities risk promoting strategies that are either purely economic, focusing on creative industries and gentrification at the expense of local culture and social inclusion; or purely cultural, supporting arts and communities without building a sustainable economic ecosystem. This divergence creates a tangible problem for urban planners and policymakers: how to develop a city in a way that is both economically robust and culturally authentic, without one dimension undermining the other.

This paper argues that the existing literature has yet to adequately bridge this divide. While numerous studies and technical reports identify the common domains of 'culture, creativity, and economy' (Scott, 2014; UNCTAD, 2010), they often take one (or more) of these approaches. Firstly, they adopt a singular orientation, either critiquing the econ-centric model or advocating for a culture-centric one, without providing a framework for synthesis (e.g., Vivant, 2013 vs. Florida, 2002). Secondly, they remain theoretical, offering definitions but few practical methodologies for how cities can diagnose their own strengths and weaknesses across these domains to inform context-specific policies. Thirdly, they lack a systemic approach, failing to account for the complex, often conflicting, interactions between stakeholders (government, communities, businesses) who all shape the creative city. Therefore, the research gap this paper addresses is the lack of an integrated, actionable, and stakeholder-oriented methodology for defining and assessing a creative city in a way that balances its cultural and economic imperatives.

This study is designed to fill this gap by proposing a new conceptual framework and methodological approach. One way to respond to it is by developing an integrated dual-orientation framework (Figure 1) that explicitly links and balances culture-centric and econ-centric variables. The other way is by employing Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), an approach designed for precisely these kinds of 'messy,' multi-stakeholder problems. SSM allows us to move from a static definition to a dynamic process of inquiry suited to a specific urban context. And by conducting those two techniques, it is intended to create an operationalizable model and matrix that translates theoretical variables into measurable indicators and activities, providing a tangible tool for urban diagnosis and planning.

We demonstrate the application of this approach through the case of Bandung, Indonesia, not to provide a universal model, but to validate a method that can be adapted to identify the most salient indicators and navigate the unique tensions inherent in any city's journey to become 'creative.'

Creative city orientation	Culture-centric	Econ-centric
Creative city values	Central value = arts, culture, and community well-being, access, and inclusion	Central value = urban economic sustainability and well-being through creative initiatives or industries
Definition of a creative city	Place of diverse and inclusive arts and culture	Place of economic innovation, creative talent, and creative industries

Figure 1. Mapping the value orientation and means to achieve the creative city (Smith and Warfield, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Analysis of Theoretical Literature and Basis for Framework Development

The construction of our proposed framework is the result of a systematic analysis of existing theoretical literature. The analysis was conducted thematically rather than chronologically or geographically. This approach allowed us to identify and synthesize core conceptual pillars – such as "culture-centric vs. econ-centric orientations," "creative community," and "creative economy" – that are recurrent across global creative city discourse (Scott, 2014; Sasaki, 2010; Landry, 2008; Florida, 2002).

The basis of analysis was to critically examine these global theories and identify their points of convergence and divergence. We then juxtaposed these established concepts with the specific guidance from Indonesia's Coordinating Ministry of Economic Affairs (CMEA, 2017) and the unique socio-economic dynamics of Indonesian urban centers. This process revealed a significant gap: while global literature often presents the culture-centric and econ-centric models as competing paradigms, the Indonesian context, with its emphasis on both bottom-up community (gotong royong) and top-down economic development, necessitates a framework that integrates and balances these two orientations.

The Theoretical Gap and Novelty for Bandung, Indonesia

The primary theoretical gap this study attempts to fill is the lack of a synthesised framework that operationalises the "balanced perspective" called for by scholars like Scott (2014) into a measurable model tailored for developing Asian cities. Existing models often lean heavily towards Western notions of the "creative class" or economic metrics, potentially overlooking the critical role of informal grassroots networks, social capital, and local cultural identity that are paramount in cities like Bandung.

Therefore, the novelty of our proposed framework (Figure 2) is that it acts as a diagnostic tool specifically designed for the Indonesian context. It is not merely a definition but a model that allows researchers and policymakers to assess the dynamic interplay between two polarised viewpoints. Firstly, top-down, econ-centric drivers (e.g., national creative economy policy, city branding, urban regeneration). Secondly, bottom-up, culture-centric drivers (e.g., organic creative communities, grassroots capability, social inclusion).

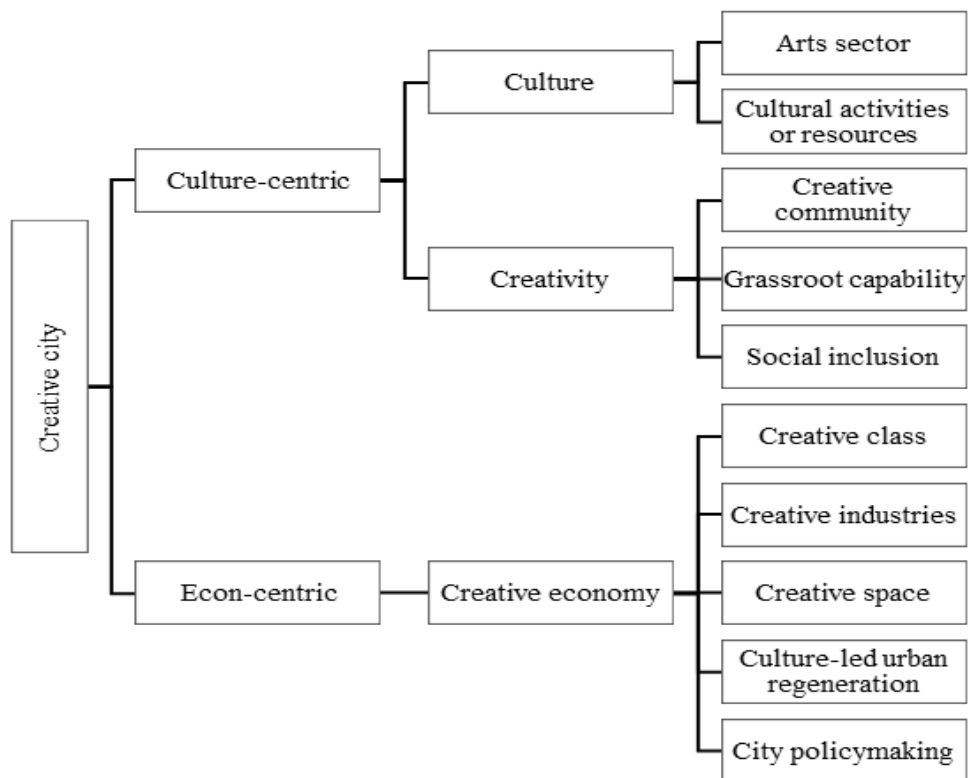


Figure 2. The proposed framework definition of the understanding of a creative city (Source: The authors).

This framework is novel for Bandung because it provides the structure to investigate a central tension in the intention of responding to the issue ‘Does the formal, government-led push for a creative economy (econ-centric) enhance or stifle the organic, community-based creativity (culture-centric) that has long defined Bandung's identity?’ This study will use this framework to identify new, context-specific indicators that measure this balance.

The Proposed Framework

Building on the analysed literature, we propose the following framework as a definition of a creative city in the Indonesian context. We argue that a creative city in Indonesia must harmonize its cultural foundations with its economic ambitions, a synthesis reflected in the CMEA's guidance.

The culture-centric orientation is represented by two intertwined variables (Landry, 2008), which are Culture and Creativity. The variable culture consists of two sub-variables derived from the literature, the arts sector (Jurene & Jureniene, 2017) and cultural resources (Punpeng, 2024; Banks & O'Connor, 2017). The variable creativity refers to human agency and consists of three sub-variables: a creative community (Minty & Nkula-Wenz, 2019), grass-roots capability (built on Flora's (2007)) concepts of human and social capital), and social inclusion (Alsayel et al., 2020; Sasaki, 2010).

Conversely, the econ-centric orientation is represented by the overarching variable of the creative economy (Howkins, 2001). This variable comprises five sub-variables identified from the literature as key economic facilitators: the creative class (Florida, 2002), creative

industries (Leslie & Catungal, 2012; DCMS, 2001), creative milieu/ space (Sawangchot, 2016; Sasaki in Song, 2015; Landry, 2008), culture-led urban regeneration (HaghighatBin et al., (2024); Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2019; Skyllstad, 2011), and city policymaking and branding (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2019; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2015).

It is crucial to distinguish between the literature we have reviewed and our own scholarly contribution. The definitions, variables, and sub-variables listed above are standpoints derived from other researchers, as cited. Our contribution, and thus our standpoint, is the synthesis of these disparate global concepts into a new, integrated framework tailored to analyse the Indonesian urban reality.

We posit that the unique identity of a creative city like Bandung emerges from the intersection of these variables. For instance, the success of its creative industries (an econ-centric sub-variable) is deeply dependent on the health of its creative communities (a culture-centric sub-variable). Similarly, effective city branding (econ-centric) must be authentically justified by the city's tangible cultural resources and intangible grassroots capability (culture-centric). This framework allows us to move beyond abstract definition and towards an empirical investigation of what makes Bandung creatively unique, thereby filling the identified theoretical gap.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design guided by the principles of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM); an approach developed by Peter Checkland to address complex, real-world problems involving multiple stakeholders with divergent perspectives (Checkland & Poulter, 2007). The research question, which seeks to understand the key indicators for developing a creative city in a context like Bandung, Indonesia, is well-suited to SSM as it involves navigating the different, often conflicting, viewpoints of various urban actors.

SSM has been effectively used in past studies to structure complex policy and urban development challenges, including sustainable tourism development, information systems planning, and organizational change. Its application in creative city frameworks is appropriate as it provides a structured yet flexible way to reconcile the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of such an initiative, moving beyond purely quantitative indicators to understand purposeful human activity.

Data Collection and Validation

The study is based on both secondary and primary data. The initial phase involved an extensive literature review to identify potential indicators of a creative city. This theoretical foundation was then validated through expert interviews. The first interview was conducted with an academic expert in SSM to ensure the methodology's correct application. A second interview was held with an expert in business model innovation within the creative industries, a key domain relevant to one of the investigated indicators.

This study was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles for research involving human participants. The following measures were undertaken to ensure the ethical integrity of the research. The first is about informed consent, which means prior to each interview, all participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, the anticipated duration of

the interview, and how the data would be used and stored. Verbal informed consent was explicitly obtained from all participants at the beginning of the interview session before any questions were asked. Secondly, on the matter of anonymity and confidentiality. To protect the privacy of the experts who contributed their insights, we have ensured their anonymity throughout this paper and any associated documentation. No personally identifiable information (names, specific affiliations, etc.) is disclosed. The data collected from the interviews is treated with strict confidentiality and is stored securely on password-protected devices. Thirdly, the right to withdraw. Participants were informed of their right to skip any question and to withdraw from the interview at any point without needing to provide a reason and without any negative consequences. Fourthly, on data management, which means audio recordings of the interviews, where made, were used solely for the purpose of accurate transcription. Fifthly, the interview questions were designed to be non-invasive and focused on professional expertise regarding soft systems methodology and business model innovation in the creative industries. The study was designed to minimize any potential risk or discomfort to the participants.

Applying the Soft Systems Methodology

The research process follows the two streams of inquiry central to SSM, which are stream of cultural analysis and stream of logic-based analysis. For the stream of cultural analysis, the research began by identifying the "problematic situation": the global phenomenon of cities labelling themselves as "creative" without a consensus on the defining indicators, despite frameworks like UNESCO's Creative Cities Network (UCCN). This situation was expressed visually through a rich picture (Figure 3), which illustrates the relationships and conflicts between the various stakeholders in Bandung's creative ecosystem.

The stream of logic-based analysis stage involves a systems-thinking analysis to define the purposeful activities required to address the situation. This was achieved using two tools, the PQR Formula ('Do P, by Q, in order to achieve R'), which shapes the development of a Root Definition – a concise statement describing the system's purpose, and the CATWOE Analysis, which enriches the Root Definition by examining the system's:

- Customers (C): The beneficiaries or victims of the system, i.e., the people of Bandung and its stakeholders.
- Actors (A): Those who would perform the transformative activities, i.e., city government, academics, creative businesses, communities, and media.
- Transformation Process (T): The core conversion of input to output. This process investigates which variables (inputs) most significantly contribute to transforming Bandung into a validated creative city model (output).
- Weltanschauung (W): The worldview that makes the transformation meaningful. This study is based on two orientations: a culture-centric view (prioritizing culture, creativity, communities, and social inclusion) and an econ-centric view (prioritizing the creative economy, creative class, and urban regeneration).
- Owner (O): Those who could stop or change the system, i.e., city stakeholders and decision-makers.
- Environmental Constraints (E): The limitations taken as given, including the geographical focus on Bandung, as well as time and budgetary constraints.

Root Definition

Based on the PQR and CATWOE analyses, the Root Definition for this system is: *A system operated by Bandung's stakeholders to investigate the city's development as a creative city by evaluating the contribution of culture-centric variables (arts sector, cultural resources, creative communities, social inclusion, grassroots capabilities) and econ-centric variables (creative class, cultural industries, creative spaces, urban regeneration, policymaking), in order to identify the most significant indicators and potentially discover previously overlooked factors.*

The final stage of the research will involve developing a proposed activity model for creating a creative city, synthesising all investigated indicators. This model will be presented in a matrix to serve as a framework for further research and practical application.

Findings and Discussion

Following the construction of the model, a final measurement needs to be created to assess whether the model is successful. According to Checkland and Poulter (2007: 42), this can be done using the 3E method, which is:

1. Criteria to tell whether the transformation T [in the making of a creative city] is working, in the sense of producing its intended outcome, i.e., criteria for efficacy (E1);
2. Criteria to tell whether the transformation is being achieved with minimum use of resources, i.e., criteria for efficiency (E2); and
3. Criteria to tell whether this transformation is helping achieve some higher-level or longer-term aim, i.e., criteria for effectiveness (E3).

Efficacy (E1) is measured by whether the model can identify which of the ten elements contributes most to making Bandung a creative city and whether there will be other elements that have not been previously discovered. For measuring the efficiency (E2), the model should also be able to be constructed within the time and budget allocated. Efficiency means the amount of output divided by the number of resources used. Meanwhile, effectiveness (E3) will be evaluated by looking at the impacts that might have emerged in similar cases in other Indonesian cities or overseas. Figure 4 shows the proposed model's human activity system for this research.

The rationale of the model above is that there are three inherent sub-systems. The first sub-system is based on Sasaki's (2007) adapted model. It concerns the cultural mode of the production model, particularly for measuring the culture variable, in which the indicators of the arts sector and cultural activities or resources (which means the arts and cultural production and consumption) are put together and evaluated through the balanced system of cultural production and consumption that uses cultural capital to develop products and services with high economic and cultural value in a system where consumption encourages creation (Sasaki, 2003; 2007). The second sub-system is about the creativity variable with three sub-variables: the creative communities or scenes, social inclusion, and grassroots capabilities. Finally, the third sub-system assesses the creative economy variable, which includes five sub-variables: creative class, creative and cultural industries, creative space or place, culture-led urban regeneration, and city policymaking.

The next step in the SSM is to compare the model with the real world, to structure the discussion about the situation and its improvement. For this study, the comparison in

the previous step is conducted by creating a matrix (Table 2). The objective in comparing the model with reality is, according to Checkland and Poulter, to find a version of reality and strategies to enhance it, so that individuals with various worldviews can live with. (2007:54).

The activity column in Figure 5's table is derived from the activities in the proposed model, with the variables originating from the literature. We identify several indicators to be operationalized further in the research from the activities and the variables.

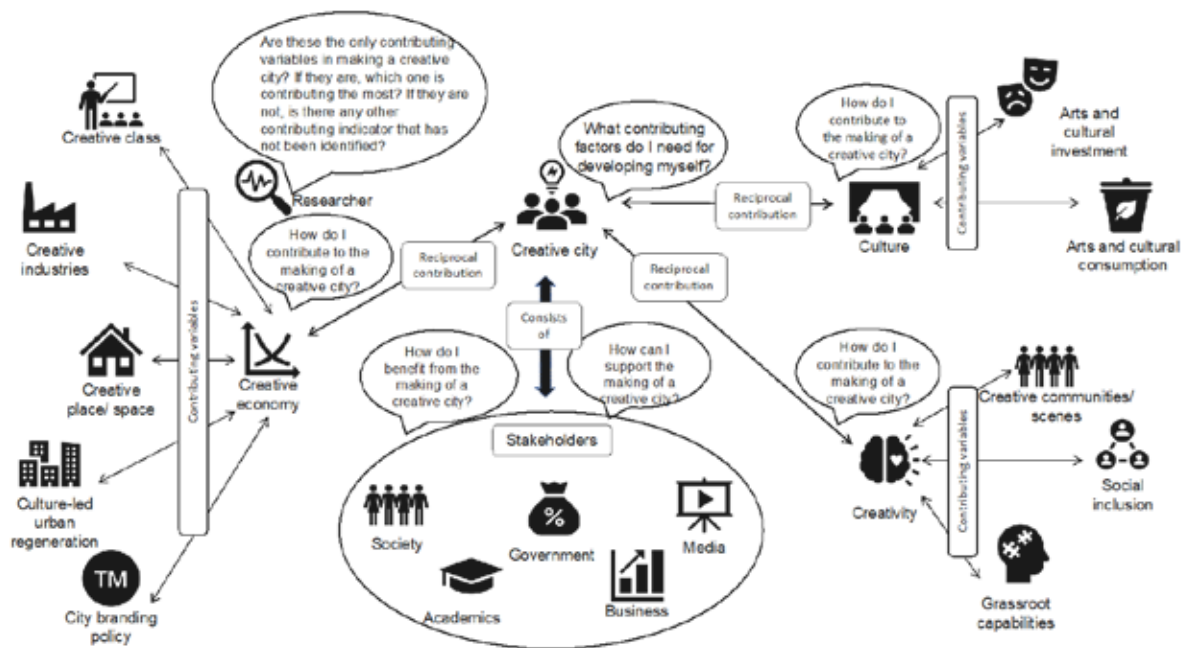


Figure 3. The rich picture of the proposed model in the SSM (Source: The authors).

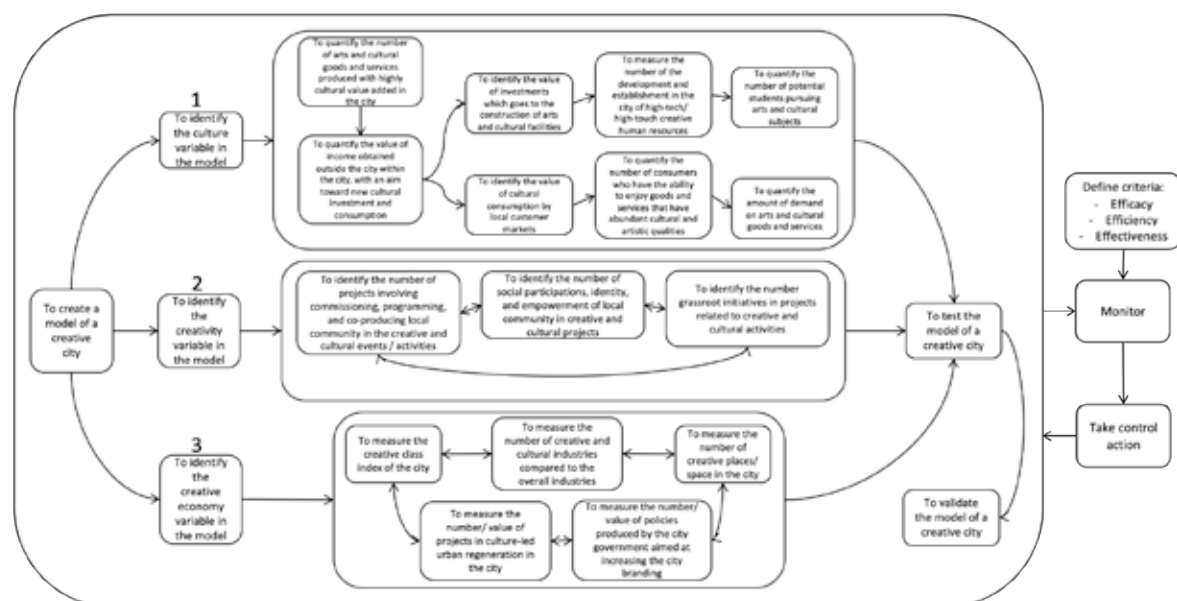


Figure 4. Proposed activity model of the SSM for the study (Source: The authors).

No	Variable	Indicator	Activity
1	Culture (the arts sector and cultural resources or activities) → Sub-system 1	The number of arts and cultural goods and services produced with high cultural value added in the city	Produce arts and cultural products with high technology and creativity
2		The value of income obtained outside the region and within the region, with an aim toward new cultural investment and consumption	Circulate intra-regional incomes
3		The value of investments goes to the construction of arts and cultural facilities.	Invest in arts and cultural resources in the city
4		The value of cultural consumption by local consumer markets	Consume arts and cultural resources in the city
5		The number of the development and establishment in the region of high-tech or high-touch creative human resources	Upgrade cultural capital in the city
6		The number of consumers who have the ability to enjoy goods and services that have abundant cultural and artistic qualities	Upgrade intra-regional consumption in the market
7		The number of potential students pursuing arts and cultural subjects	Attract and train creative and knowledgeable people
8		The amount of demand for arts and cultural goods and services	Increase demand for high-quality goods and services
9	Creativity (the creative communities' activities) → Sub-system 2	The number of projects involving commissioning, programming, and co-producing local community in the creative and cultural events or activities	Assess creative communities or scenes
10		The number of social participations, identity, and empowerment of the local community in creative and cultural projects	Assess social inclusion
11		The number of grassroots initiatives in projects related to creative and cultural activities	Assess grassroots capabilities
12	Creative economy (how the ecosystem supports the city) → Sub-system 3	Creative class index established	Measure creative class index
13		The number of creative and cultural industries compared to the overall industries	Archival research on creative and cultural industries mapping
14		The number of creative places or spaces in the city	Survey on creative places or spaces
15		The number of projects in culture-led urban regeneration in the city	Survey on culture-led urban regeneration
16		The number of policies produced by the government that aims at recognizing the city branding	Archival research on city policymaking on branding

Figure 5. The proposed matrix to construct the model of making a creative city (Source: The authors).

Our preliminary observation found that many art organizations in Bandung are associated with particular communities in the creative sector. Regarding the culture and creativity variables, the respondents will be members of art organizations and involved in related

creative communities. The art organizations should possess all three criteria: based in Bandung, commercially produce art and cultural products, understand the supply and demand of arts and cultural activities in the city, and makes educational art or cultural activities (i.e., workshops and training). Whereas the creative communities first need to be Bandung-based. Secondly, they produce events or activities which involve local communities, including commissioning and programming the events. Thirdly, the projects need to include social participation, uphold the identity of the locals, and empower the surrounding communities. And fourthly, the communities should produce or involve in creative and cultural projects which include grassroots initiatives.

For the final variable, we employ the method of process tracing, which means analyzing the available data concerning the five sub-variables of the creative economy. Referring to the work of Pouzakarya and Bahramjerdi (2019), we see that in a creative city, there needs to be a working situation of the creative economy. Their framework mainly discussed the creative and cultural quarters, which consist of two broad categories, culture and creativity, and two approaches in urban development, namely culture-led urban regeneration and creative city planning, each containing several measures. Based on this understanding, we propose an adapted framework for depicting the creative economy variable for this study.

There are three different uses of the process-tracing method. The first is theory-testing process tracing, the second is theory-building process tracing, and the third explains outcome process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Since investigating the creative economy variable is to assess whether all the sub-variables are evident in Bandung, the process-tracing variant that applies is theory-testing.

The sub-variables of the creative economy are, based on the literature review, the creative class, the creative and cultural industries, creative space or place, culture-led urban regeneration, and city policymaking. Each sub-variable will be observed with a selective method for the process tracing method. For example, firstly, the creative class will be measured by establishing the index referring to Florida's (2002) creative class index. Secondly, the archival research will be conducted on the sub-variables of creative and cultural industries and city policymaking. For the creative and cultural industries, the data collected will map how the industries in the city are distributed among the seventeen sectors, also based on the city's geographical locations and the size of the businesses. Whereas for policymaking, the aim is to find out what the city government has already created concerning initiating policies on city branding. Thirdly, surveys will be conducted for the sub-variables of creative places or space and culture-led urban regeneration to see whether such places and projects are in the city. The survey on creative space observes whether the city has the right combination of 'hard and soft infrastructure' (Landry, 2008). Whereas the sub-variable of culture-led urban regeneration, the survey examines projects in the city that 'improve economic, physical and environmental situation of the regenerated area, [...] putting culture and creativity as effective factors in the middle of urban regeneration approach' (Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2019).

Conclusion

This study has developed and proposed a comprehensive model for creative city development, constructed through a systematic literature review and validated by expert judg-

ment. The model posits that the development of a creative city is contingent upon three core variables: (1) culture, encompassing the arts sector and cultural resources; (2) creativity, manifested through creative communities, social inclusion, and grassroots initiatives; and (3) the creative economy, supported by an ecosystem of creative class, industries, spaces, culture-led regeneration, and strategic policymaking.

Employing Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), this research frames creative city development not as a problem to be solved, but as a complex, multi-stakeholder situation to be systemically explored and improved. This theoretical research practice moves beyond a static definition to offer a dynamic framework for inquiry, tailored to acknowledge the unique socio-cultural and economic fabric of a specific urban context, in this case, Bandung, Indonesia.

Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

The implications of this study are threefold. Firstly, from the theoretical viewpoint, this research contributes to the creative cities discourse by synthesizing the often-divergent culture-centric and econ-centric orientations into a single, integrated framework. It demonstrates the utility of SSM in urban studies, providing a methodological template for grappling with complex, "messy" urban problems that involve diverse stakeholders and conflicting worldviews. Secondly, from the practical point of view, for urban planners and community leaders, the proposed model and its accompanying operational matrix (Figure 5) provide a tangible toolkit for diagnosis and action. It enables cities to move beyond vague branding and identify specific, measurable indicators to assess their strengths and weaknesses across the full spectrum of creative development. Thirdly, from the policy standpoint, the findings suggest that effective creative city policy must be holistic and integrated. Policymakers are encouraged to move beyond siloed initiatives and develop strategies that simultaneously support cultural production, foster inclusive creative communities, and enable a sustainable economic ecosystem. The emphasis on city branding and policymaking within the framework underscores the need for strategic narratives that are authentically rooted in a city's verified assets.

Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. As a theoretical construct, the proposed model, while informed by literature and expert validation, awaits full empirical testing and quantitative validation in Bandung. Furthermore, the initial application is focused on a single city case study. The findings and the specific weighting of indicators are therefore inherently shaped by the unique context of Bandung, and their direct transferability to other cities may be limited without adaptation.

Platform for Future Research

This study establishes a robust platform for several avenues of future research, such as for empirical application, which means that the most immediate next step is the operationalization of the proposed matrix (Figure 5) in Bandung to collect data, test the model's efficacy, and identify which indicators are most salient in this context. Another area to be explored is to do comparative studies. A compelling future research direction would be to apply this same SSM-based framework in cities with different socio-cultural and economic profiles (e.g., a European capital, a smaller secondary city, or a city in a different developing

economy) to enable comparative analysis and refine the model's universal and context-specific elements. Apart from that, future work could delve deeper into the interactions and potential tensions between specific variables in the model, for instance, investigating the precise relationship between culture-led urban regeneration and social inclusion to understand how economic development can avoid gentrification.

Applicability to Other Contexts

The framework itself is designed for applicability across geographies. The core variables of culture, creativity, and economy are universal pillars of creative city discourse. The SSM approach is particularly valuable because it does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution; instead, it provides a methodological process for any city to define its own creative city journey based on its unique assets, constraints, and stakeholder perspectives. Therefore, while the *specific findings* from Bandung may not be directly transferable, the *methodological framework* is highly adaptable. The key to successful application in a different socio-cultural context would lie in repeating the process of contextualization – using the framework as a guide to discover which indicators are most relevant and how the inherent tensions between cultural and economic values are manifested and negotiated locally.

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From Urban Space to Everyday Place: Appropriation of Public Leisure Areas *in Belo Horizonte, Brazil*

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Abstract

The dramatic changes occurred in the organization of cities reverberate in the very individual and interpersonal levels of spatial relationships. This essay approaches the public space by transposing fundamental concepts identified among the urban cultural system to the everyday experience of particular places. This transposition gives an insight into the comprehension of the built environment by exploring links between scales. The referential frame adopted is the set of discourses by Soja (2000) on the post-metropolis. The study cases, two contrasted leisure areas situated in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, are potential spots for the cultural and spatial appropriation of people. They are examined within the city context by means of a more specific literature as well as an empirical research based on ethnographic observational methods. The experiment provides the application of global concepts in very concrete places, where a sharply connection with the processes of urban restructuring is evidenced.

Keywords: *Urban Space, Public Space, Appropriation, Everyday Place, Leisure Areas, Urban Scales, Belo Horizonte, Brazil*

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Introduction

Dramatic changes in the spatial organization of cities, that occurred in the last decades, have significantly changed the “urban condition.” A restructuring process has caused a direct impact in the way of life and in the appropriation of public spaces (Soja, 2000: 234). Indeed, it is noticeable how the subject calls attention in the area of the urban research in general and particularly in the study of open leisure areas (e.g. Bonastra and Casals, 2014; Ostermann and Timpf, 2009; Franck and Stevens, 2007).

The appropriation of space is here defined within the transformation and adaptation forces between the built environment and the human behavior. As it deals directly with the concrete dimension of places, the appropriation has served as a parameter for evaluating situations and informing intervention programs. Despite its planning potential, the scholarly approach that deals with a broader urban context hardly feed the discussion in a closer, interpersonal level. This sort of methodological disconnection reflects a disciplinary problem: regardless of the collaboration between the field of urban studies – which include areas such as geography and urban planning – and those dealing with smaller scales – like landscape design or architecture –, the transit between scales becomes impaired or fragmented. There are noticeable gaps that need to be bonded.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the relationship between the environment and the public space from the standpoint of the appropriation. Therefore, fundamental concepts identified at the level of the urban milieu are transposed to the everyday experience of particular places. This artifice gives an insight into the comprehension of the built environment by exploring the links between spatial scales.

The transposition of urban scales is a topic that has been not regularly explored in the academic context. Nevertheless, some approaches made in modern times are very suggestive in this sense. Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein (1977) weave an interdependent network of archetypal patterns organized into three levels: cities, buildings and details. The relationships among the patterns are, however, limited to a schematic system that blurs cultural particularities. Hillier (1996) also tries to establish connections between the scale of the city and places through a tool – space syntax – that evaluates the built environment by using parameters such as movement, segregation, interaction and security. Even so, there is still a lack of semantic studies that best assess the socio-spatial quality of the urban milieu. More recently, authors such as Brenner (2019, 2000) are addressing the contemporary urban restructuring scales by revising relevant conceptual as well as methodological approaches. Although some insights are done into the analysis of specific places, investigations based on the microlevel of individuals are yet to be carried out.

This essay deals precisely with concepts identified in the urban context and its transpositions to the experience of common, daily use places. In order to promote a link between these scalar dimensions, an appropriate frame of approach is chosen. The main reference adopted is the set of discourses by Soja (2000) on the postmetropolis, especially those dedicated to the consequences (exopolis and fractal city) and adaptations (carceral archipelago and simcities) of the new restructuring processes of the modern metropolis. These discourses touch, from different starting points, urban socio-spatial relations, giving regular

insights into the respective everyday phenomena. The “general particularities” observed in the city of Los Angeles are taken as parameters for the analysis of different places in other contexts.

The complexity concerning this task requires an expanding of the theoretical and methodological bases, here assessed by authors such as Castells (1983 [1972]), Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), Harvey (1993) and Santos (1994). An important reference of disciplinary synergy is found in the environment-behavior studies, particularly the spatial analysis dealing with ethnographic and anthropological techniques (e.g. Rapoport, 1990). More recent researches show an attempt to highlight some conceptual and empirical matters concerning the public space, with a particular consideration of sites like squares and parks (Mehta, 2014; Amin, 2008; L'Aoustet and Griffet, 2004). Other works have demonstrated the methodological potential that socio-spatial analysis offers when based on the discourse of renowned authors in the field of urban sociology (Vaide, 2023). In this context, criteria such as inclusiveness, publicness and pleasurability are used to access the everyday activities involved in the human dynamics of places. The approaches include topics that range from the observation of the interactions among people, to the study of movement among bodies and matter, being the quality of urban life an important parameter.

The selected case studies for closer examination are public leisure areas, due to the potential they offer for the appropriation of people. The two contrasted places are situated in the city of Belo Horizonte, a Brazilian state capital that was planned and built in the end of the 19th century with a geometrized urban area surrounded by a more informal suburb (Comissão Construtora da Nova Capital, 1997; Guimarães, 2012). The estimated rate of 200 thousand inhabitants was reached at the 1940s and increased exponentially in the next decades (Gomes and Lima, 2005). The original planned grid has been engulfed by the city itself, whose metropolitan area hosts around 6 million people nowadays.

The two leisure areas are very different in their urban context, so the contrast can offer a platform for comparison. At one extreme stands the Liberty Square, the core of the governmental power surrounded by a high standard neighborhood (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Overview of the Liberty Square in Belo Horizonte, 2007. (Source: The author).

At the other extreme is the Santa Lucia Dam, situated between a slum (favela) and the "formal city" (Figures 2 and 3).

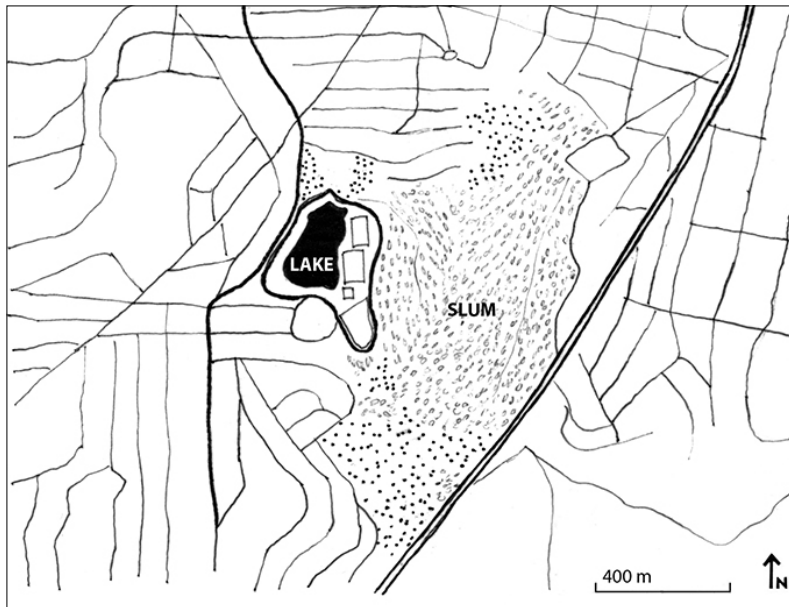


Figure 2. Sketch-plan showing the urban situation of the Santa Lucia Dam in Belo Horizonte with emphasis on the lake and the slum, 2015. (Source: The author).



Figure 3. Overview of the Santa Lucia Dam in Belo Horizonte, 2006. (Source: The author).

The discrepancy is clearly shown in the “social vulnerability index” launched by the municipal government, with the two respective neighborhoods placed with extreme opposed rates (Belo Horizonte, 2000). But are the Dam and the Square really disparate, or is the distinction only an appearance? Are the conceptual and spatial variables similar in both

cases? The contrasting cases raise the question of how the transposition of a general urban dimension to concrete places is manifested in the two socio-spatial situations, being appropriation the main parameter for comparison.

To put these recreational areas into the city context, a more specific literature is accessed. The methodology of research also involves empirical methods. Although no formal surveys were launched, nor a quantitative handling of the material systematically accomplished, a scrupulous ethnography-based, non-participatory observation was endeavored (see Jones, 2020; Alwi, 2016; Cobb and Hoang, 2015; Clark, Holland, Katz and Peace, 2009; White, 1980). The behavior of people, the fluxes of activities, as well as the spatial quality of the environment were some of the categories taken into account when approaching the circumstances of analysis. Frequent visits on the sites in different days of the week and moments of daytime, with an acute examination of the activities – common as well as unusual ones – followed by descriptive and critical notes, were the main resources for data surveying. A great effort was also made in the registration of photographic images, so the scenes could be further and closer reviewed afterwards.

The main set of data was collected on site along the years 2008 and 2009. Some considerable changes have been thenceforth occurred in the leisure areas, since they are situated in sectors of the city that suffer from housing as well as commercial and cultural pressures. The square has especially been undergoing a major transformation, with the increase of cultural and touristic activities and the secretariat buildings becoming museums (Lemos and Bortolozzi, 2014; Faria, Penido and Gonçalves, 2025). In order to monitor the more recent changes in the Square as well as in the Dam, frequent visits for observation and comparison were made along the past years. Although some information was updated, it has been noticed that the situations were largely maintained in its substantial essence.

The following approach to the selected phenomena is preceded by a brief description of the places of study, so basic characteristics are pointed out and the contrast between them is more evidenced. The processes of transposition of scale and appropriation of space are then explored by taking the set of Soja's discourse as a base. The topics are: new centralities; implosion-explosion; inequality-segregation; control and surveillance; and simulations and hyperreality. Finally, the proposed approach to the appropriation of space by transposing the urban and interpersonal scales is assessed. In the meantime, the possibilities as well as the limitations of development and application of the achieved results are discussed.

The Square and the Dam

The original planned area of Belo Horizonte was built in the late 19th century to house the new capital of the State of Minas Gerais. The Liberty Square, designed as a government core in the geometric urban grid, was located in the encounter of great avenues. It was organized by a green rectangle headed by the presidential palace and flanked by office secretariat buildings. In the surrounding neighborhood were installed the elites of government leaders and public servants (Lana, 1990). The area is nowadays occupied by residential and commercial, well-built tall buildings. The Square represents an important landmark in the urban imaginary, besides being intensively used as a leisure public space. It has been regarded as a spot where different kinds of appropriation can occur (Fernandes and Medeiros, 2012; Caldeira, 1998; Albano, Lemos and Werneck, 1985).

The Santa Lucia Dam, otherwise, was located in the former suburban sector of the original city plan. The area, to be occupied by productive rural units, was subsequently settled by the working class (Guimarães, 2012). Within this context, the Dam was created in the 1950s as a result of the hydrological management of the Leitão Stream (Soares, 2001). Once entangled by the city, it currently shows a typical contrast caused by urban slum communities: an informal self-built, low-class cluster, entangled by middle and upper classes neighborhoods (Lima, 2011). There is a park with green areas and communal services along the border of the Dam. Its appropriation by local people shows, at first sight, a dual process of both interaction and segregation.

These two places have also a curious formal counterpoint. The Square, with its institutional buildings arranged around the public gardens, is situated at the highest point of the planned grid like an acropolis (Guimarães, 2013). The Dam, by contrast, expresses an aquatic void with the slopes falling toward the lake.

New Centralities

Among the concepts discussed by Soja (2000) when addressing the transformation of the urban milieu, stands the emergence of new centralities. In the foundation of Belo Horizonte, a strong centrality was determined by a strict geometric grid of streets and avenues inspired by cities such as Washington (USA) and La Plata (Argentina). However, the surrounding informal area, planned for future expansion, was promptly settled by workers and immigrants, who attended the construction of the city. In the next decades, in the beginning of the 20th century, this encompassing zone had a significant increase in its density and extension (Fundação João Pinheiro, 1997: 48; Estado de Minas, 1996). During this process, a new centrality sense, based on a peripheral-centrifugal force, was undoubtedly created.

With the urban sprawl, occurred from the middle of the 20th century on, the commercial and institutional power of the downtown was maintained. While the old centralities were transformed among time and social change, new concentrations of people and life appeared inside as well as outside the original grid. In this process, new centralities appear by the blurring of urban-suburban boundaries and the hybridization of cultural influences (Soja, 2000). These phenomena are understood and identified more clearly when we observe the daily activities carried out in urban spaces, which represent legitimate, although fragmented, centralities.

Nowadays, an extensive program of requalification is still under course at the Liberty Square (Prodemge, 2017; Lemos and Bortolozzi, 2014). The activities usually taken in the secretariat buildings have been transferred to a governmental center to the north of the city, in the way to the international airport. The so-called “Administrative City” is defining a new urban centrality by causing important developments in dwelling and commercial areas, as well as in transportation connections. The Square and its surroundings, by their side, are being rehabilitated into a cultural complex, in which buildings are housing functions such as museums and educational facilities (Faria, Penido and Gonçalves, 2025). This is undoubtedly redefining the reference and meaning of the place – a new centrality – for the collective imaginary of the city.

The Dam has also determined a new convergence within the surrounding neighborhoods. The water and the vegetation enhance the environmental quality of the place. The open,

free of construction space represents a void in the urban fabric and provides panoramic views around the lake. Moreover, the attraction is given by the potential public use and the recreational and social activities it gathers (Jácome, Nogueira and Silva, 2024).

By means of similar and diverse centripetal forces, both the Square and the Dam show that new centralities are emerging, although the old ones still maintain its strong presence in the city.

Implosion-Explosion; Borders Diluted?

The constructive implosion-explosion, combined with the blurring of boundaries, is another phenomenon pointed out by Soja (2000) in the transformation of the urban milieu. In both the Square and the Dam, there undergoes an intense constructive densification followed by obstructionist processes.

The built environment among the Square is becoming increasingly more homogeneous, despite the mixture of old and modern buildings. The “frontiers” of heritage preservation have been systematically violated by the demolition of old houses and the proliferation of skyscrapers (Lopes, 2006). The accelerated process of vertical growing represents an explosion toward the sky. A new frontier is created, but another one is attenuated: the view to the mountain range called Serra do Curral, a natural and germinal element that once situated the city and guided people within the territory, is being gradually obstructed by the constructive mass. If until the 1950s the mountains could still be seen from the acropolis-like Square, some decades later this relationship became barely perceptible (Guimarães, 2013).

The use of the public space of the Square also defines borders. The population density and the shortage of recreational areas in the city attract residents who seek for leisure. The belt of joggers around the Square forms a fluid barrier that is difficult to transpose by passers-by during the rush hours. Once inside, among the gardens, this kind of boundary dilutes in appropriation cells, which set up a constellation of more contemplative as well as congregative activities.

The Dam, by its side, had a significant intervention when the park was installed in the early 1990s (Soares, 2001). In that occasion, a range of facilities, including a sport complex, a healthcare center and a police station, were located to the east of the lake. The situation has not changed a lot until the present time. The infrastructure, attended mostly by poor people, forms, together with the lake, a protection barrier from the richer, middle-class neighborhoods (Lansky, 2012: 55-56). At the opposite side of the slum, a highway constitutes another boundary that confines and prevents the access to the area. This bordering phenomenon does not happen to the north and south edges, where remaining green areas function as buffer stocks in the dilution of the slum. This interlude can be understood as a fragile locus for a surviving nature, as well as a potential space for real encounter – or clash – with the surroundings.

Meanwhile, the slum itself becomes more and more dense with the disappearance of open spaces and the increment of floors on the houses. Is such a growth going to result in a constructive implosion? Until when will the slopes endure such a pressure?

In both the Square and the Dam, it can be stated that the borders are not being blurred in all situations or aspects. Some physical, as well as spatial and psychological barriers, are still constraining the urban fabric. It is also true that there is a very dynamic constructive movement under development.

Inequality and Segregation

Soja (2000: 265) also argues that the new urbanization processes enhance the socio-economic inequalities. The axes around class, race and gender have been transformed and are becoming increasingly complex and interrelated, while the urban environment tends to be more fragmented. It is also noted that the old polarities – bourgeoisie-proletariat, black-white, men-women – are still very active.

Belo Horizonte is still constrained by a strong centrality. The wealth, measured by rates concerning infrastructure, services, housing, education and skin color, among other criteria, is concentrated primarily in two areas, the designed city and the region of Pampulha to the north (Belo Horizonte, 2003). If the Square is a focus of well-being, the Dam's slum can be regarded, on the contrary, as a fragment of poverty within the city. Two opposed poles of inequality are clearly expressed.

In the original plan of Belo Horizonte, there was a noticeable distinction between the central regular city and the surrounding suburban area. An equivalent phenomenon took place in the use of the Liberty Square during the early decades of the 20th century. The two rows of palm trees, divided by a central pathway, served as a support for social segregation, with the elite at one side and the populace at the other (Caldeira, 1998: 91-92).

This separation is not so clear today. The peripheral flow of the jogging elite is there, but it coexists with diverse groups using seats and pathway corners among the gardens. Despite the predominance of housing and office buildings, as well as the lack of commerce around the Square, the educational and cultural institutions bring to the scene people from different backgrounds. This does not necessarily mean a mixed social interaction, since some pockets are being set: neighbors, students and young workers, for example. Anyway, the Square provides an accessible public space with a range of options for appropriation.

It has also been argued that the Liberty Square enhances a well-integrated area concerning the urban fabric and the sense of urbanity (Fernandes and Medeiros, 2012). It seems, however, that the "real spaces of interaction between people" and the "intense use of public space" should be analyzed in a more ethnographic closeness. Then the synthetic activities identified in the Square could be considered not only in an everyday basis, but also in its meaningful implication within societal matters.

It has also been demonstrated in a research work carried out in Belo Horizonte that the proliferation of suburban upper-class neighborhoods is followed by nearby settlements of low-income social groups (Mendonça and Perpétuo, 2006). The polarized social structure, with its usual system of labor relations, is then reproduced. In the case of the orthogonal planned city, there is no housing place for the workers, due to the dynamics dictated by the elites and the real estate market. A transportation system, nevertheless, guarantee the flux from and to the peripheries, so the services and apartments can be attended by the working, poorer classes.

Meanwhile, along the 20th century, the yet unoccupied slopes of the Leitão Stream offered to impoverished people an opportunity of living in a relative closeness to the city. After the entangling of the slum by the urban fabric, there was an inverse occurrence: people of middle and upper-classes settled in the new urbanized neighborhoods of Santa Lucia and Sao Bento to the south side of the Dam.

With the remodeling of the Dam and the leisure facilities around the lake, the contact between different populations is supposedly encouraged. However, there is a phenomenon similar to the Square, with groups of users sharing a common place but hardly communicating to each other. In spite of the high attendance, the social classes do not mix much (Lansky, 2012; Baptista, 2003) and have different comprehensions of the public space in terms of sociability and sense of belonging (Xavier, Lustoza and Batella, 2019; Jácome, Nogueira and Silva, 2024). This dual situation of possible interaction and segregation can be observed in the everyday activities. Both the sinuous benches and some services located to the side of the slum – such as the capoeira's (Brazilian dance) school and the horticultural popular store – bring people together (Baptista, 2003: 103-104). Also sports and commerce (open-air market and refreshment kiosks) activities are important social loci for the sector of higher income as well as for the people from the poorer community, who also come to the lake for more informal practices such as fishing and wandering. The free exploration of the shore is a highly educational and socializing activity restricted to the dark skin children. Richer, white kids, however, have not this opportunity, since they and their parents are too worried about safety matters.

Control and Surveillance

The discourses of Soja dealing with the intensification of social and spatial control are clearly applicable to the leisure areas here in examination. New modes of regulation are created through the privatization, management, surveillance and design of the built environment. Soja (2000: 300) could be describing the Liberty Square when mentioning the emergence of new cultural acropolises, which are defined as pseudo-public spaces with invisible signs that drive the slag away. In fact, the transformation of the Square into a cultural complex has been followed by a sophisticated surveillance machinery.

At the Dam, as well as at the Square, there is a peripheral flow of jogging athletes. It constitutes, notably in the case of the Dam, a strategy for space surveillance. The dynamic, and at the same time fixed circuit, form an authentic patrolling mechanism. Tall light poles ensure the visualization and presence of the round along the night.

There are also formal human patrols in both leisure areas, but some differences exist. The Square is overseen by unarmed, radio equipped watchmen, whose jackets show the word "surveillance." Although they serve the general public by providing tourist information, their presence is closely related to the disappearance of dark skin children who used to swim in the ponds and fountains.

A similar means of spatial control is imposed in the case of the Dam, where municipal guards now patrol the shores of the lake. They are complementary to the regular Military Police, whose barracks are strategically located at the southern end of the complex, in an area of possible contact between the slum and the middle-class district of Santa Lucia.

Another mode of surveillance is found to the north side of the Dam's slum, in the interface with the richer neighborhood of Santo Antonio. Besides the physical barrier stressed by a sharp slope, a skyscraper stands out like an observatory or panopticon (Foucault, 1977; Manokha, 2018) (see Figure 3). Although residential, this tower symbolizes the presence of some authority's watching eyes, besides providing a privileged position for the vigilance of the Dam and its surroundings.

The corresponding element at the Square is the video-monitoring system. In this case, the symbolic meaning is concretized by a very explicit and functional device, which is connected to the telecommunication antennas on the top of the police building located next to the government palace. It is difficult to understand the real need for such an apparatus in a place already so controlled. A camera installed in the bandstand takes advantage of the circular configuration and the elevated situation of this structure – again, the panopticon-like position (Foucault, 1977; Koskela, 2003). The lovers and groups of teenagers that used to be there have no more privacy. Basic functions of this charming building, such as shelter and site seeing, are being trespassed by a remote alien observation.

Simulations and Hyperreality

The last discourse of Soja (2000) here taken into account refers to the restructuring of the collective imaginary and its effects on everyday activity. Ideological and political strategies are seen as subtle forms of social and spatial regulation that manipulate conscience and urban life. Some phenomena assessed are the simulacrum (understood as the perversion of reality by image), the psychasthenia (or mental disorder in the relationship between the human being and the environment) and the hyperreality of virtual culture.

The aforementioned process of "enculturation" of the Liberty Square shows a distortion of reality. The removal of bureaucratic functions implicates the withdrawing of important political meanings of the place that used to be the governmental core of the city. With the new administrative center being now placed at the edge of the city, the square tends to become a virtual hyperreality or, at best, a distant reality. Once again, privilege is given to the elites, since low levels of education among the general population restrict the efficacy of formal modes of culture cultivation such as that provided by traditional, formal museums. The program of rehabilitation has been criticized by the one-dimensional land use and the lack of popular facilities (Ferolla, 2004). The Square is surrendering itself to tourism, which calls much more attention and improves business. Culture could also be seen as a means for the democratization of knowledge, but this seems not to be the main premise at the Square.

The Christmas decoration usually placed on the grass is an exemplar source of hyperreal simulations. The giant plastic-made objects are the extreme of an a-topia on the one hand, and a marketing influence on the other. What do they advertise, the arrival of Santa Claus from the North Pole or the transposition of economical values from an ancient religious celebration? Imitations of enormous gift boxes, along with snowmen, stress the propaganda for consumption (Rabiei, Golrokh and Bahrami, 2021: 15-16). This is the time when the decorative lights are lit and purchases, sales and loans are increased. The main square, that engenders an important public place of the city, becomes an arena for business manipulation of people.

The situation at Santa Lucia Dam is much rawer and, at the same time, subtle. However, the simulations are nonetheless perceptible. The very design with sinuous paths, shady corners and green meadows around the lake, as well as the illusion of a democratic and convivial place, represent a clear distortion of reality. The public space shows, with a more acute observation, clear signs of deterioration and segregation, being examples the degraded playground and the abundant garbage on the streets of the poorer community. The houses at the lower part of the slum have a better aspect (plaster, paint) than the ones at the upper side. This is due to richer people living in a more convenient location, but can also be regarded to revitalization programs that superficially tinkers slums. An example of this strategy is more clearly found in the very agglomerate of the Dam, on the sector facing the highway to the east, where colorful painted hovels make a supposedly better view for the passers-by. Indeed, the conflicting relationship between dwellers and the municipal government among slum communities in Belo Horizonte and other state capital cities usually calls for actions of social mobilization (Fernandes and Pereira, 2010; Leitão and Deleclave, 2013).

Finally, it is noted in both the Square and the Dam, as well as in different leisure areas in the city, the appropriation of virtual culture. The jogging circuits show a peculiar incidence of this phenomenon. Entertained by music, social networks and other means of digital virtuality – that can be noticed mainly via the use of earplugs and mini-microphones –, many of the athletes keep an excessive concentration in their duty. Paradoxically, this behavior can also be interpreted as a result of an alienating process, being the physical exercise the only purpose in matter and the remaining connection with the real world. In the case of the earphone users, the sounds around are blocked, so the urban noise or a friend's calling cannot be clearly heard. It becomes very difficult for passers-by to get closer or even change some face glances. The possibility of communication among people and within the environment is tragically diminished. The capacity of observing things and movements weakens, while the perceptible image is reduced to a background. By getting absorbed by a parallel dimension, people get disconnected from reality.

Conclusion

General implications of the phenomena here approached show that the identification and the characterization of urban factors contribute to a better understanding of concrete places. The appropriation developed to be sharply connected with the processes of urban restructuring. In this relational movement, social and spatial dimensions are shown as essentially inseparable. The set of discourses by Soja (2000), taken here as the main reference, proved to be very adequate. Among the key ideas illustrated are:

- The emerging of new centralities based on everyday use of public spaces.
- The transformation of borders by means of spatial and psychological barriers.
- The enhancement of inequality and socio-spatial segregation processes, despite the persistence of socializing pocket activities.
- The controlling and surveillance of space by people themselves, police agents, as well as technological mechanisms.
- The distortion of reality caused by alienating virtual processes, by the withdrawal of political meanings, and by the appeal to commercial and cultural consumption.

The experiment of transposing a general urban dimension to a more daily spatial scale is efficacious in providing the application of global concepts in empirical places. This transfer process suggests the collaboration among study fields dealing with urban space such as architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning. It comes to be a surprise that the interfaces within those disciplines have not yet been properly explored, in spite of the conceptual and academic closeness.

Many differences between the two leisure areas – the Liberty Square and the Santa Lucia Dam – were both confirmed and declined. On the one hand, the processes of settlement and urban development gather spatial structures, control mechanisms and behaviors clearly distinct in each situation. On the other hand, the coincidence of variables and responses in the appropriation of both places show some super-structural forces acting indiscriminately in the urban milieu. In this sense, the empirical examples should be broadened to other cities in Brazil and abroad, in order to verify the inference in diverse contexts.

If this essay presents basically a conscientious reading on the situations, it is desirable, as a next step, to get into the formulation of propositions. The analysis and criticism are not entirely operative if the problems are only pointed out and explained, although this is a fundamental move for a discussion. An example of enquiring is suggested by Soja (2000: 281-282) himself, who calls the attention for a new cultural policy capable of building intercultural coalitions and providing spaces of resistance for concrete action. This could be a task for further research: to check, in the general context and particularly in the city of Belo Horizonte, if there are representative examples of these movements or spatial politics, and how they give insight into the appropriation of the public space.

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Examining the Social and Cultural Implications of Philippine Folk Dance

to College of Arts and Sciences (Cas) Students in One State University in the Philippines

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Abstract

The researcher aims to examine the social and cultural implications of Philippine Folk Dance to students in particular to their perceptions, attitudes, and how it affects the identity of the Filipinos. This study employed a phenomenological research design and purposive sampling in choosing the participant based on the given criteria. Semi-structured interviews was utilized and employed validated interview guide from the field expert and pilot testing. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing the data. The results revealed that the perception of the students profound admiration for the meaning, purpose, and beauty of traditional dances. Also emphasized are the value of cultural heritage preservation and the contribution of folk dancing to the development of Filipino pride, patriotism, and a feeling of identity. Additionally, Strong feelings of appreciation, pride, uniqueness, expressions, cultural ties, and engagement for their personal development. Moreover, folk dance has a significant effect on students' social and cultural identities.

Keywords: Social & Cultural Implications, Philippine Folk Dance, Patriotism, Cultural Identity & Heritage

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Introduction

Physical Education (PE) is essential to the health and wellbeing of all citizens across the country. It plays an important role in developing physical fitness, improving motor skills, and providing an opportunity for social interaction and team building. The inclusion of PE in Article XIV of the Republic of the Philippines focuses on education that affirms the importance of PE in the country and the need for its continued study (Aquino, 2022). Additionally, in accordance with Article XIV, section 14 of the Constitution, the State shall actively strive to foster the preservation, enrichment, and dynamic evolution of a Filipino national culture that is unified in its diversity, while also allowing for free artistic and intellectual expression. To ensure the culture is promoted and preserved, Philippine folk dance is one of the culture that should be highly valued and celebrated. Moreover, CHED Memo No. 20 in 2013 affirmed that to produce graduates who are thoughtful and knowledgeable, institutions of higher learning should instill in them values that are reflective of a humanist orientation, particularly those that are deeply rooted in the culture.

The Philippine folk dance is an important part of the country's cultural heritage. For a sustainability of expressive culture, dance is a form of social expression, and a way for people to connect with their past, celebrate their identity, and express their emotions (Bravo et al., 2022). It is also a way for people to stay connected to their roots and appreciate their unique cultural heritage (Sathittham et al., 2021). Folk dance is a powerful tool for unifying communities as it is often performed in large groups and helps to strengthen social bonds (Peterson, 2016). In addition, folk dance has been part of Philippine culture for centuries. It is a part of the Filipino identity, and its practice has been passed down from generation to generation. Folk dances vary from region to region, with each region having its own unique style and movements. These dances are typically performed during special occasions, such as festivals, weddings, and religious events.

Consequently, the Philippine folk dance provides an opportunity for people to connect with their past and to express their culture. It is a way for people to show their pride in their identity, and to celebrate their culture. It is also a way for people to express their emotions, such as joy, sadness, and love. Folk dance is a form of cultural expression that can be used to express feelings that cannot be expressed through words (DEM Domingo, 2018). It has a strong social and cultural impact. It brings people together and helps to create a sense of community. It fosters social cohesion and allows people to appreciate their cultural heritage. It is also a way for people to express their creativity and to explore their culture. Likewise, the Philippine folk dance can be used to raise awareness of important social issues. It can be used to promote understanding and respect for different cultures, to promote social justice and equality, and to bring attention to important causes (Ashley, 2012).

The literature review demonstrates the significant role that folk dance plays in the development of Filipino culture and identity. The reviewed studies indicate that folk dance has a positive effect on identity formation, socialization, and cultural values (Reyes et al., 2020). Specifically, they found that folk dance provides a form of self-expression, a way for participants to connect with their culture, and a method for participants to interact with one another in a meaningful way. The findings of these studies shows that folk dance should be seen as an integral part of Filipino identity and culture. Thus, folk dance can be seen as a tool to promote socialization, cultural values, and identity formation in the Philippines.

As such, folk dance should continue to be encouraged and supported as part of Filipino culture and identity (Potocnik, 2020).

However, research on the social and cultural implications of Philippine folk dance is still relatively scarce. There is a need to further explore the impact of these dances on local communities, and their role in sustaining cultural heritage, identity and pride (Andressen, 2013). Additionally, more research is needed to understand how folk dances can be used to foster peace, solidarity and cooperation in the region. Furthermore, there is a need to examine how folk dancing can be used to promote education, health and well-being, and how it can be used to empower marginalized populations in the country (Lobo, 2023).

The Philippines has a rich and varied cultural heritage, and folk dance is one of its most prominent features. Philippine folk dance is a reflection of the country's history, values, and beliefs (Cariaga, 2014). It is an important part of Filipino culture, and is an integral part of traditional festivals and celebrations. The purpose of this study is to explore the social and cultural implications of Philippine folk dance among College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) students in one state university in Laguna, Philippines. Specifically, this research will examine the participants' perceptions of the importance of folk dance, their attitudes towards it, and its effects on their cultural identity. This qualitative research study will use open-ended interviews as the primary method of data collection.

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural implications of Philippine folk dance among CAS students in the university. It contributes to the existing literature on the cultural importance of folk dance and its effects on cultural identity. The results of this study were useful for educators and policy makers in understanding the importance of folk dance and its implications for cultural identity, and inputs in making interventions that would increase students' engagement in and appreciation of Philippine folk dance.

Conceptual Framework

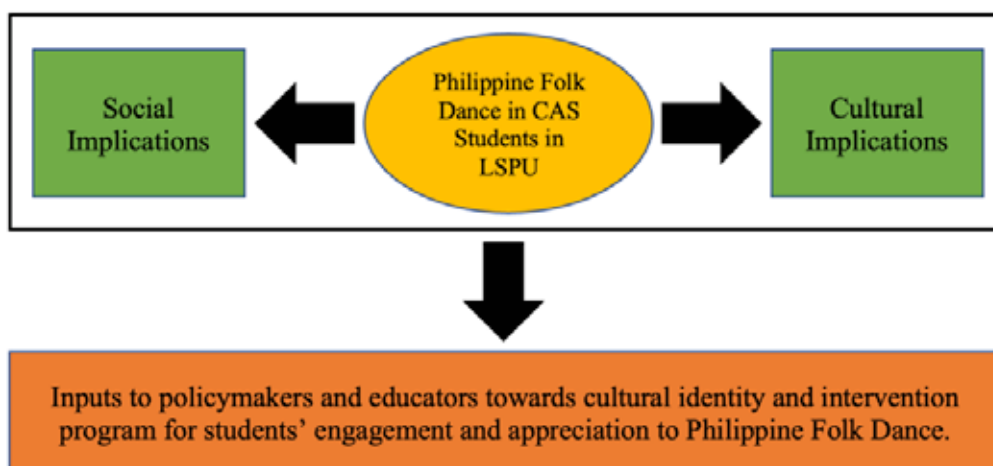


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Figure 1 explains the goal of this study which is to evaluate the social and cultural implications of Philippine Folk Dance on 1st Year College students at the CAS in the university across the five programs. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how dance can be used

to foster cultural identity, appreciation, and engagement among students. The researchers used an interviews as a technique in gathering essential data to gain insight into the students' attitudes and beliefs about folk dance and its relationship to cultural identity. The results of the study used to inform policymakers and educators on how to create and implement intervention programs that can increase student engagement and appreciation of Philippine Folk Dance. Ultimately, this study help to promote the appreciation of Philippine culture and identity among students, which lead to greater understanding, respect, and tolerance of different cultural backgrounds.

Research Questions:

The researcher aims to examine the social and cultural implications of Philippine Folk Dance to CAS students in particular to the following research questions;

1. What are the participants' perceptions of the importance of Philippine folk dance?
2. What are the participants' attitudes towards Philippine folk dance?
3. How does Philippine folk dance affect the social and cultural identity of the participants?

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative research under a phenomenological approach utilized by the researcher to explore the lived experiences of participants in relation to a particular phenomenon (Qutoshi, 2018). In this case, the phenomenon being studied is the social and cultural implications of Philippine folk dance among college of arts and sciences students. Through this approach, researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the meanings and interpretations of the participants in relation to their engagement in Philippine folk dance. These insights used to inform interventions that would increase students' engagement in and appreciation of Philippine folk dance.

Participants

This study explored the experiences of CAS 1st year students in one state university in Laguna, Philippines who have recently taken a PE 2 class which was focused on rhythmic activities. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants. The purpose of this is to ensure that the sample was represented of the population, and to ensure that the participants have all taken the same PE 2 class (Campbell et al., 2020). The data gathered from this study was used to gain insights into the students' experiences and perceptions of the class, which in turn used to inform future PE 2 classes and have intervention programs for current students.

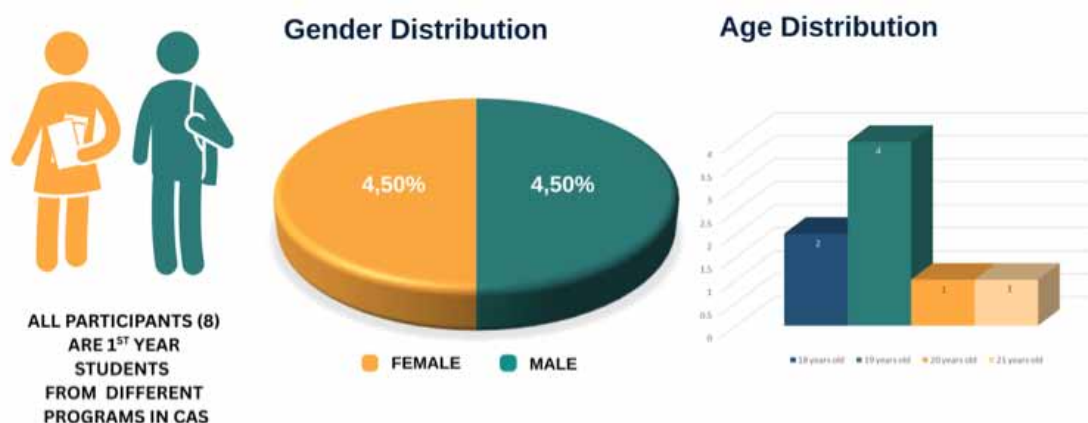


Figure 2. Research Participants' Profile.

Figure 2 demonstrated the primary information of the research participants. This consisted of 4 males and 4 females across the programs of CAS to examine also the differences of interest between genders when participating in folk dance. The age of the participants ranged from 18 years old to 21 years old.

Instrumentation

The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews that retain some of the structure of traditional interviews, while allowing for some flexibility (Galleta, 2013). The interviews focused on the participants' perceptions of the importance of folk dance, their attitudes towards it, and its potential effects on their cultural identity. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the participants' views on folk dance and its role in their cultural identity.

An interview guide as research instrument employed in this study. It is a document used by interviewers to structure and guide an interview which includes a list of questions to be asked and a structure for the conversation (Roulston & Choi, 2018). The purpose of the guide is to ensure that the interviewer covers all of the key topics and points during the interview, while giving the candidate a chance to provide meaningful answers and feedback.

Moreover, validating an interview guide as a research instrument was an important step undertaken by the researcher in order to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data that was collected (Birt et al., 2016). This process involved testing the questions to ensure that they are clearly worded, capture the intended information, and are not biased or leading in any way. To validate the interview guide, the researcher reviewed it with field experts using content validation, conducted a pilot study to assess its appropriateness and effectiveness, and evaluate the guide. This process helps to identify any potential issues and guarantee that the guide was valid and effective for the main study.

Data Gathering and Analysis

The process of conducting interviews was an important aspect of the current research. The researcher identified the target population, decide on selection criteria for the participants, create a list of questions, design the interview structure, and conduct the interviews. After the interviews have been conducted, the researcher transcribed the interviews and code the data according to the themes that emerge. The data was then analyzed using thematic analysis to draw conclusions about the results. Finally, the researcher presented the results of the analysis in a clear and concise manner. Interviews were important tools for collecting data and provide valuable insights into a research topic. They help to uncover information that would not be obtained through other methods such as surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting the phenomenological research about the social and cultural implications of Philippine Folk Dance in College of Arts and Sciences Students in Laguna, Philippines, ethical considerations were taken into account. Firstly, it is important to ensure respect for all participants by informing them of the research goals, purpose, risks, and benefits before they agree to take part. Secondly, informed consent was obtained from all participants, which include an explanation of the research and its purpose, the expected duration of the

research, the risks and benefits of participation, and the participants' right to withdraw from the research at any time. In addition, the researcher made sure that all data collected were confidential and anonymous, as well as take steps to protect the participants from physical, psychological, or any other harm. Furthermore, the researcher made sure to store the data securely and only use it for the purpose of the research. Finally, the researcher allowed access to the results of the research to the participants, or allow access to the results in a manner that is appropriate to the research.

Results and Discussion

This section presents all the gathered and analyzed data that address the research questions.

Figure 2 demonstrates the thematic map shows the emerging themes and subthemes that describe the role of Philippine folk dance among CAS students. Derived from the analysis of their insights and reflections, the map captures the multidimensional significance of folk dance as both an artistic and cultural expression. Three major themes surfaced including Students' Perceptions towards the Importance of Philippine Folk Dance, Attitudes of CAS Students towards Philippine Folk Dance, and Social and Cultural Identity Concerns of CAS Students which encompassing interconnected subthemes that reveal how students interpret, value, and experience folk dance. Collectively, these themes underscore the role of Philippine folk dance not only as a medium for cultural appreciation and identity formation but also as a catalyst for personal development, social connection, and national pride.

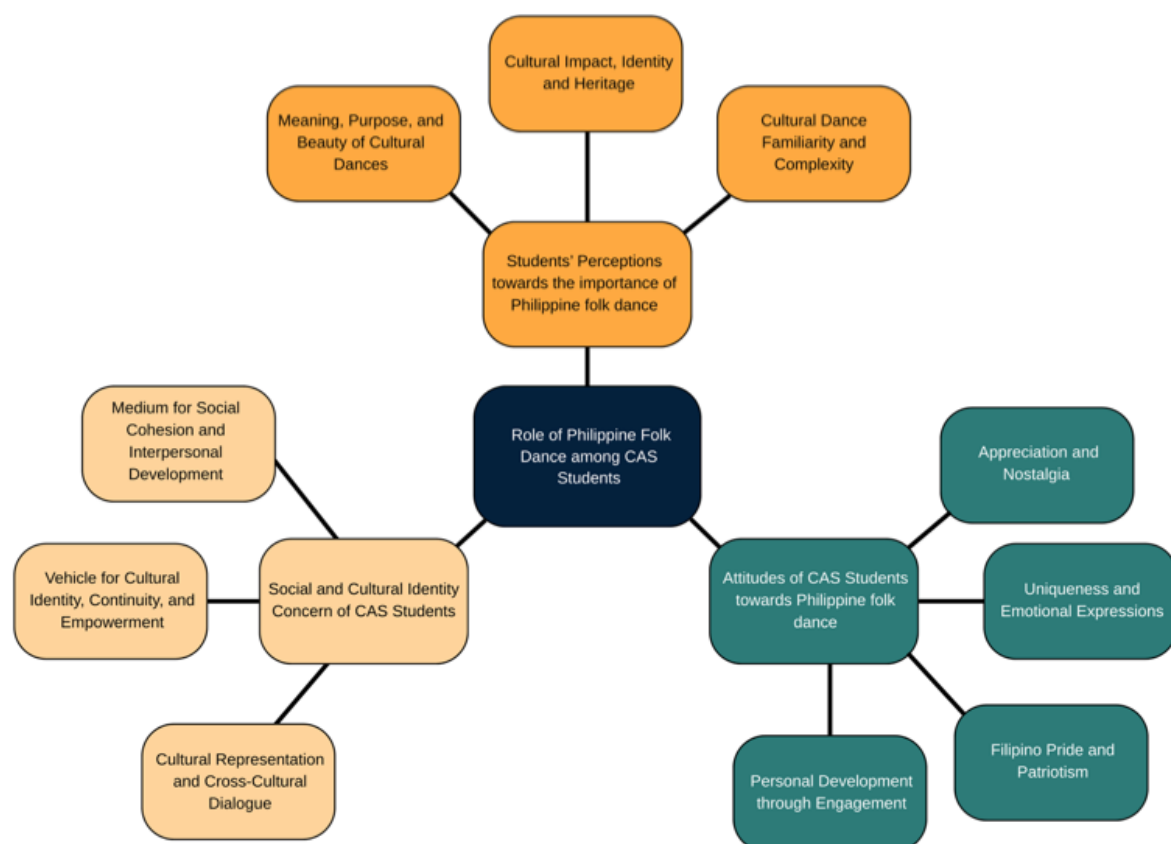


Figure 3. Thematic Map of Emerging Themes and Subthemes on the Role of Philippine Folk Dance among CAS Students.

Students' Perceptions towards the importance of Philippine folk dance

The students' participants experienced the significance of Philippine folk dancing. The participants show a profound admiration for the meaning, purpose, and beauty of traditional dances. They appreciate folk dancing in expressing Filipino identity, cultivating cultural awareness and understanding. Also emphasized are the value of cultural heritage preservation and the contribution of folk dancing to the development of Filipino pride, patriotism, and a feeling of identity.

Meaning, Purpose, and Beauty of Cultural Dances

The research participants acknowledges the beauty, purpose, and meaning that are ingrained in Philippine folk dancing. They contend that comprehension of its setting enables one to more fully appreciate its beauty, symbolism, and cultural significance.

CAS Female 1 mentioned that *"Philippine folk dance is familiar yet astonishing every time I encounter it. Ever since I was a kid, it is commonly danced during school events like foundation day or as PE subject requirement. And as time goes by, I came to realized that it may seem simple to do, but once you try to deep dipper into it and try to understand its very context, you'll better see its beauty, purpose, and significance."*

The dancing style is seen as embodying Filipino identity and highlighting Philippine culture and traditions. Additionally, Filipino folk dance is renowned for its distinctiveness and variety throughout the nation's various areas. The many community groups' values and lifestyles are represented by the dancing styles. knowledge the many Filipino folk dances helps one have a deeper knowledge of the country's rich cultural diversity. CAS Male 1 stated that *"it impacted me by understanding the culture and basic steps of folk dance that is relevant to their way of living."* By emphasizing how consistently each step in Philippine folk dance is performed, it puts it into perspective with other current dance forms. The statement implies that doing the dance correctly calls for accuracy and technique, both of which demand dedicated practice.

Bautista (2017) looked at the cultural importance of Filipino folk dance in upholding and fostering Filipino identity. It underlined how Filipino folk dances serve as a symbolic depiction of their identity, embodying the values, customs, and past of the Filipino people. Juris (2015) examined how cultural dances, such as folk dances, convey rich symbolic connotations that embody the beliefs, habits, and rituals of a specific culture in their study on the aesthetic qualities of dance. They emphasized how crucial it is to comprehend the cultural setting in order to truly appreciate the exquisite beauty and meaning of these dances. Meanwhile, folk dances help Filipinos feel a feeling of pride and belonging on the function of folk dance in forming Filipino identity (Namiki, 2017). The study emphasized the positive effects of folk dance activities on people's feeling of Filipino identity and their ability to become acquainted with their cultural heritage.

Furthermore, Bautista (2017) also investigated the variety of Philippine folk dances among several locations in a study piece. It underlined how the varied dance forms and styles that can be found all around the country represent the distinctive customs and ways of life of local communities. The general cultural landscape of the Philippines is richer and deeper as a result of this diversity. Pitsi et al. (2015) examined the effect of folk dance education on students' cultural knowledge and enjoyment. The results showed that instruction in

Philippine folk dances deepened students' awareness for the nation's cultural variety and improved their comprehension of their own cultural history.

Cultural Impact, Identity and Heritage

Filipino folk dance provides a significant impact on people's sense of cultural identification since it helps them understand their culture, the past, and the meaning of the fundamental dance moves. CAS Female 2 declared that *"the Philippine folk dance is known for its own uniqueness and its variation throughout the whole country. It is important because it is one of the things that are keeping our culture alive and it also gives us a sense of identity."* It fosters pride in and a love of their nation and culture. Folk dance is more than just a type of dance; it has deep symbolic value that emphasizes how important it is to respect and embrace one's cultural heritage.

CAS Female 3 added that *"the Philippine folk dance serves as a form of identity to us Filipinos. This dance mirrors the lifestyle and customs the early Filipinos had. As a Filipino and a student, I am grateful that we are able to preserve this culture because it gives me a sense of pride since this was also used to express emotions which I also able to do when performing."*

As a means of comprehending and conserving Filipino culture, the significance of studying Philippine folk dance is underlined. The dancing style is regarded as a depiction of the Filipino people's origins and customs, helping them to gain a better understanding of their own history. The folk dance of the Philippines is regarded not as a rich but as a lively aspect of the nation's cultural history. The dancing style is regarded as crucial for preserving Filipino history and culture, highlighting their rich legacy, and encouraging a sense of national identification and patriotism among Filipinos. Moreover, folk dancing in the Philippines is seen as a crucial component of conserving and transmitting cultural heritage. CAS Female 3 acknowledge that *"we get to learn more of our cultural heritage and the traditions here in the Philippines. It is important to preserve it by still be able to learn and continue to keep it alive up until now and to the future generations because folk dance had a huge contribution to our pride as Filipinos."* It makes it possible to understand and value cultural customs and virtues. Folk dance preservation is regarded as essential to upholding Filipino identity and pride for generations to come.

Filipinos view Philippine folk dancing as a means of self-identification as stated by CAS Male 3 *"it shows the identity of every places or locals"* as agreed by CAS Male 2 as he mentioned that *"the importance of it is to show the belief and culture of different local municipalities."* It still serves as a vehicle for the self-expression of early Filipinos, reflecting their way of life, traditions, and emotions. Folk dancing gives people a chance to express their experiences while also feeling proud of and connected to their cultural heritage.

Philippine folk dance displays the variations and continuities in the traditions and customs of the country's numerous ethnic communities. CAS Male 4 mentioned that *"we all know that different places have different dances that represents their culture, practices and traditions that reveals their identity."* It greatly contributes to the country's cultural identity by serving as an indication of the depth and beauty of its heritage. Folk dance underscores the value of conserving and valuing these traditions while highlighting the diversity of Filipino culture. Respecting the dance style is equivalent to respecting one's own Filipino identity.

In a study of Patrick (2021), it investigated how Filipinos' feeling of cultural identity is influenced by Philippine folk dancing. It emphasized how folk dance functions as a kind of identity, representing the way of life, traditions, and feelings of the first Filipinos. The study underlined how taking part in traditional dance events helps people feel proud of and connected to their Filipino ancestry. Steinberg (2018) highlighted the significance of learning and protecting Philippine folk dance as an avenue of gaining an understanding of Filipino culture in their study on the preservation of heritage cultures through folk dance. They emphasized how important folk dancing is for preserving cultural heritage and fostering national identity because it displays the origins, traditions, and past of the Filipino people.

Filipinos use folk dance as a means of self-expression and emotional connection Cenabre-Galindon (2022). Shay (2014) pointed out how folk dance demonstrates the differences and similarities in the traditions and customs of the country's several ethnic communities. This was emphasized as a way for people to convey their feelings and emotions while becoming proud of and connected to their cultural heritage. Folk dance, they highlighted, contributes to the Philippines' cultural identity by showing the richness and beauty of its legacy and displaying all aspects of Filipino culture.

Cultural Dance Familiarity and Complexity

The remark of being exposed to Philippine folk dancing at a young age and its appearance at school functions underscore its familiarity. The statements of participants also convey the person's ongoing sense of awe and respect for the dance style, suggesting that it never ceases to amaze them as CAS Male 2 stated that "*it is memorable and worth remembering.*"

The assertion stresses that although Philippine traditional dance may seem straightforward, looking more closely at its surroundings exposes its complexity. CAS Male 4 mentioned that "*it is fun, a little bit hard but I enjoyed it. And it is somehow stress relieving in our school workloads.*" The dance style is characterized as exceptionally difficult and constantly offering a fresh experience. It is regarded as a satisfying and beneficial pastime that offers a vacation from academic work and reduces stress. The difficulties involved with learning folk dance are highlighted by the acknowledgement of these challenges and the requirement for practice and patience.

Moreover, Lobo (2023) found that early exposure to cultural dance, such as through school activities or festivals, helps people become familiar with Philippine folk dancing. Likewise, Buerdon (2015) note how participants continually express amazement and respect for the dance form, underscoring how this exposure aids people in developing a feeling of connection and appreciation towards their cultural heritage. This implies that people are never bored by Filipino folk dancing, even as they get older. The study highlights how important this ongoing appreciation is for preserving cultural practices.

The intricate nature of Philippine traditional dance and the satisfaction it provides to participants (Santa & Tiatco, 2019). The study underlines that although the dance may at first seem simple, deeper inspection exposes its complicated structure. Additionally, Rodriguez-Jimenez et al. (2022) emphasize the alleviating stress effects of participating in folk dance. CAS students frequently find the dance to be demanding but pleasurable, and it gives them feelings of fulfillment and an escape from academic burdens. Participants said that taking part in dance activities, such as folk dancing, helped them relax and gave them a productive way to unwind from their regular academic commitments.

Attitudes of CAS Students Towards Philippine Folk Dance

Strong feelings of admiration, appreciation, pride, uniqueness, expressions and cultural ties used to describe how CAS students feel about Philippine folk dance as well as engagement for their personal development. The students exhibit a sincere interest in folk dance and excitement for it, realizing its importance and value in all facets of their lives.

Appreciation and Nostalgia

A number of expressions make one feel nostalgic, thinking back on *"the good old days"* as stated by CAS Female 4 and how the Philippine folk dance recalls back pleasant memories. Folk dance participation has been characterized as joyful, memorable, and deserving of memory. CAS Male 2 attested that *"the importance of folkdance is celebrating and appreciating our own culture."* It also emphasized as a vital component of Filipino cultural appreciation and celebration. It provides a more thorough comprehension and understanding of the distinctive identities of various local municipalities by showcasing the values and cultures of those communities.

CAS Female 3 stated that *"My attitudes toward Philippine folk dance are to respect and give appreciation to our very own culture. It is important that we give respect to Philippine folk dance because this represents our identity. If we respect it, we are also respecting ourselves as Filipinos who are part of it. Let us also appreciate our culture and be proud of our own. Proper knowledge in different Philippine folk dance is also important to fully understand our cultural heritage."* It is underlined how important it is to appreciate and value Philippine folk dancing. Different folk dances must be properly understood and known in order to completely appreciate and value cultural heritage. Conversely, it is a way to reflect on the past and to appreciate and commemorate the predecessors who utilized dance to communicate their feelings, way of life, work, and religion. It is regarded as a means of protecting and honoring the history and heritage of the country.

People can discover and appreciate the depth, vibrancy, and astounding essence of their cultural roots by participating in Philippine folk dancing. CAS Male 3 mentioned that *"it made me aware and realize being a patriot through the dance I learned because it is not just a dance, but it has something deep meaning in performing folk dance."* It fosters a sense of patriotism and nationality by giving insights into the customs, way of life, and traditions of the earliest Filipinos. People can better comprehend and identify with their heritage through folk dancing.

Mortel (2016) focused on the role that exposure to folk dance plays in fostering cultural awareness and identity in Filipino teenagers. It is believed that appreciating folk dance is a way to honor and value Filipino culture, preserve cultural history, and comprehend the various identities of nearby towns (Bandala, 2018). The significance of having a thorough understanding of the various Philippine traditional dances is also discussed. Shay (2014) highlights the intricate nature of Philippine traditional dance and the need for more investigation. The study emphasizes how the dance is both demanding and entertaining for participants, leading to feelings of appreciation and fulfillment. Furthermore, the act of engaging in folk dance is described as pleasurable, memorable, and deserving of remembered who connects Philippine traditional dance with remembering pleasant memories. This idea is consistent with the idea of folk dance as a way to remember and pay tribute to the

forefathers who utilized dance to convey their feelings, way of life, profession, and religion. Folk dancing is viewed as a means of preserving and honoring the Philippines' history and cultural heritage.

Uniqueness and Emotional Expressions

Filipino folk dance is characterized as a type of emotional expression which reflects a variety of feelings, beliefs, and customs. CAS Female 2 shared that *"At first, when the word 'folk dance' comes to my mind, my initial thought would be that it is a dance that has complicated dance moves and will be difficult when performed. As we tried to practice and perform a folk dance, my thoughts about the Philippine folk dance still hasn't changed since but now, I feel proud of our culture because dancing really is a common way of expressing one's feelings, but the way the Philippine folk dance expresses it is much more unique than the others."* Its distinctiveness is emphasized, especially when compared to other dance genres. The dance style is regarded as a representation of the vibrant national history.

Filipino folk dance is renowned for using movement and choreography to express a variety of feelings, beliefs, and customs. Paradela (2022) stress the importance of emotional expression in traditional dances and how they function as a medium for narrative, festivities, and cultural representation in their study of Philippine folk dance. Folk dancing stands out from other dance genres due to its unique emotional expression, which also enhances its cultural significance. Likewise, Filipino folk dance is special because it can convey a wide range of feelings in a distinctive and culturally meaningful way (Okamura, 2013). It differs from other types of dance in terms of emotional expression, and its intricacy and difficulty add to its distinctive qualities. Filipino folk dance is an important part of the nation's cultural heritage since it is used as a tool for cultural representation, narratives, and the preservation of the country's past.

Filipino Pride and Patriotism

Engaging in Philippine folk dancing fosters feelings of nationalism and pride. CAS Male 2 stated that *"I am humble and being patriotic person because of the learnings in folk dance."* It is regarded as an embodiment of cultural pride along with a means to honor and advance Filipino traditions and culture. CAS Male 1 shared that *"I am very proud in our rich culture and tradition that we must celebrate and promote for the next generations and present in international stage."* On national as well as international stages, folk dancing is regarded as a way to highlight the diversity of the nation's culture and customs.

It highlights the importance of folk dancing in exhibiting the diversity and cultural identity of the Philippines for present and future generations, as well as on international stages. Folk dance from the Philippines is valued as a cultural artifact that exemplifies the distinctive traditions and customs of the nation's various regions. Folk dancing contributes to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, generating a sense of national pride and identity (Kim et al., 2019; Lixinski, 2013). Additionally, Filipinos can exhibit their cultural pride through folk dancing on venues around the world as well as domestically. It acts as a vehicle for cultural representation and diplomacy, allowing the sharing of Filipino traditions and customs with a larger audience on a global scale. Folk dance has a significant role in promoting Filipino identity and increasing global awareness and appreciation of Philippine culture (Lobo, 2023).

Personal Development through Engagement

Folk dance participation has been characterized as supporting personal development. CAS Male 4 mentioned that *“through dancing, I developed different attitude like patience and appreciation on what have before.”* It fosters dispositions like humility, appreciation, and patience. People gain greater comprehension and appreciation for historical customs and practices through dancing.

The participants observation regarding the acquisition of dispositions like tolerance and appreciation is consistent with studies on the advantages folk dancing has for individuals. Folk dancing gives people a platform to develop positive attitudes and values including self-control, tenacity, cooperation, and respect. Kico and Liarokapis (2022) attested the advantages of dancing, particularly folk dance, reported improved patience, a greater respect for cultural heritage, and their own development as a result of their participation in dance activities. Meanwhile, Folk dancing gives people the chance to learn more about and develop a deeper appreciation for traditional ways of life. Participants develop understanding of the cultural meaning and symbolism behind the motions by learning and practicing traditional dance moves. A higher appreciation for cultural customs and heritage results from this understanding. Harris (2022) stated that folk dance plays an important part in fostering a sense of respect and admiration for other cultures by encouraging participants to show their love for the dance form.

Consequently, Folk dancing gives people a platform to express their own and gain self-confidence. Individuals can improve their rhythm, stage presence, and physical coordination by acquiring and executing dance routines. Improved self-esteem and self-expression are benefits of the skill cultivation and achievement process. Ingram (2013) illustrated that folk dance has a positive effect on people's self-esteem by demonstrating how participants experienced happiness and fulfillment with their dance. Folk dance frequently involves participation from a group or community, promoting interpersonal communication and cooperation. Participants gain the ability to cooperate, synchronize their motions, and work toward a common objective. This feature of folk dancing aids in the growth of social abilities, teamwork, and a sense of identity.

Social and Cultural Identity Concern of CAS Students

Understanding the social and cultural identity of students is essential in exploring how Philippine folk dance shapes their sense of self and belonging. For students, participation in folk dance goes beyond artistic performance; it becomes a medium for cultural expression, social connection, and identity formation. Through shared movement, rhythm, and tradition, students engage in experiences that nurture community bonds and reinforce pride in their Filipino heritage.

Medium for Social Cohesion and Interpersonal Development

Philippine folk dance significantly contributes to the social dimension of identity formation among students. Participation fosters camaraderie, teamwork, and harmony, encouraging students to work collectively and develop a shared sense of belonging. The cooperative nature of folk dance practices builds interpersonal relationships and strengthens community bonds. As expressed by CAS Male 1, *“Folk dance serves as a venue for fostering social cohesion and interpersonal development.”* Through group performances, participants learn collabora-

tion and unity, promoting respect and mutual support within the academic and cultural setting. This aligns with Lobo (2023), who emphasized that folk dance enhances the social fabric by encouraging participants to act as cooperative and socially responsible members of their communities.

Vehicle for Cultural Identity, Continuity, and Empowerment

Folk dance plays a vital role in maintaining and strengthening cultural identity among students. It reconnects them to their heritage, traditions, and rituals – instilling pride in their Filipino roots and deepening their appreciation of national identity. CAS Female 2 articulated that *“Filipino folk dance offers individuals a way of expressing oneself and empowerment by teaching us about the symbolism, implications, and purposes underlying each movement, costume, and musical element.”* Through this, students not only preserve cultural traditions but also gain a sense of empowerment and belonging. Supporting this, Camacho et al. (2012) asserted that the teaching and performance of folk dances enable the transmission of cultural heritage to future generations. Engagement in such art forms enriches students’ understanding of the historical and social contexts of Philippine culture while enhancing self-expression, confidence, and pride in their ethnic identity.

Cultural Representation and Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Beyond personal and local identity, Philippine folk dance also revolutionize in modern trends and also serves as a powerful medium for cultural representation and global communication that promotes artistic ingenuity and synergistic collaborations (Chandnasaro, 2025). Students recognize that performing folk dances allows them to become carriers of culture, showcasing the richness and diversity of Filipino traditions to both local and international audiences. As expressed by CAS Male 3, *“When we perform folk dances, we are not just dancing; we are showing the world who we are as Filipinos.”* Similarly, CAS Female 4 shared, *“Through folk dance, I feel proud to represent our culture and let others see the beauty of our traditions.”*

These statements illustrate how participants view themselves as cultural ambassadors who embody and promote Filipino heritage. Their performances become living expressions of identity that encourage appreciation and understanding beyond cultural borders. Patrick (2014) emphasized that folk dance serves as a platform for cultural exchange and national representation, allowing others to witness the vitality and distinctiveness of Filipino heritage. Through these expressive acts, students not only affirm their individual identities but also cultivate a collective sense of national pride and cultural solidarity.

Philippine folk dance profoundly shapes both the social and cultural identity of its participants. It strengthens social bonds through teamwork and shared experience, reinforces cultural continuity and empowerment by deepening pride and self-expression, and extends cultural identity beyond local boundaries through representation and intercultural dialogue. These intertwined experiences demonstrate that folk dance is not merely a physical performance but a transformative cultural practice that connects individuals to their heritage, their peers, and the broader global community.

Although the findings strongly support the role of folk dance in strengthening cultural identity and social cohesion among students, these interpretations must be viewed in light of the limited participant pool involved in this pilot study. The rich narratives provided meaningful depth; however, broader policy or curricular recommendations should be approached cautiously until similar patterns are confirmed across larger and more demographically varied groups.

Implications to University Practice

The findings of this study highlight the essential role of cultural arts specifically folk dance as a tool for strengthening students' identity formation, social cohesion, and sense of belonging within the state university setting. For institutions seeking to promote holistic formation, the integration of Philippine folk dance should extend beyond compliance-based curricular requirements and be approached as a strategic tool for values formation, student engagement, and cultural continuity.

State Universities and Colleges and other academic institutions may consider formalizing co-curricular or extracurricular folk dance programs, establishing peer-led cultural performance circles, or embedding community-based cultural immersions in General Education courses. Faculty training may also be strengthened to ensure that cultural instruction is not only technical but contextually grounded in heritage discourse. Furthermore, the strong emotional resonance expressed by participants demonstrates that folk dance activities can serve as low-cost but high-impact interventions for student well-being and identity affirmation, especially in institutions serving diverse or marginalized populations.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides valuable insights into the social and cultural implications of Philippine folk dance among CAS students, certain limitations were acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited to only eight (8) first-year students from a one state university campus, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. As a phenomenological approach, the goal was depth over breadth; however, the small and localized sample means that the perspectives gathered may not represent the experiences of students from other regions, socio-economic backgrounds, or academic disciplines. Additionally, gender and age variations were minimally represented, preventing deeper comparative analysis across demographic groups. Future studies may involve larger and more diverse cohorts drawn from multiple universities across different regions of the Philippines to validate and expand on the insights generated in this pilot investigation.

Conclusion

Folk dancing in the Philippines is viewed as an important and treasured component of the research participants' cultural legacy. They recognize the importance that folk dancing plays in presenting Filipino identity and emphasizing the nation's numerous cultural traditions, and they enjoy the beauty, meaning, and symbolism that are embedded in it. Folk dance is viewed as a crucial tool for protecting and enhancing participants' cultural identities, inspiring feelings of great pride, connection, and nostalgia. It promotes a sense of patriotism by helping people better appreciate their unique culture, history, and customs. Participants can express their sentiments, ideas, and experiences while experiencing an overwhelming feeling of Filipino pride thanks to the distinctiveness and emotional manifestations inherent in Philippine folk dance. Folk dance also has a great effect on human growth, encouraging qualities like tolerance, appreciation, and humility. Folk dance fosters social cohesion and solidarity among participants by encouraging collaboration, teamwork, and a sense of purpose. It acts as a forum for cultural representation and exchange, enabling participants to introduce more people to the variety and richness of Filipino cultures. Philippine folk dance, in its whole, plays a significant part in forming the social and cultural identities of its players, encouraging a profound feeling of identity, appreciation for culture, and empowerment.

Recommendations

The results of the study will be the inputs to policymakers and educators towards cultural identity and intervention program for students' engagement and appreciation to Philippine Folk Dance. Additionally, it is recommended for administrators and teachers that folk dance has to be more known and understood by the students through holding cultural events, workshops, and educational programs that emphasize the value and elegance of Philippine folk dance. Likewise, recognize and include Philippine folk dance in the curriculum that can promote a sense of cohesion and respect for various cultural traditions. Additionally, the students may recognize the advantages of participating in Philippine folk dance for their personal growth. Encourage people to take part in dancing activities as a way to cultivate crucial traits. Draw attention to the beneficial effects that folk dance may possess on wellbeing and personal growth. For future researchers, it is recommended that this study be replicated in other universities, including both urban and rural institutions, as well as schools with strong performing arts programs versus non-arts institutions that may effect on people, communities, and cultural identity. Exploring gender-based or age-based contrasts in perceptions of folk dance may also offer further insight into how cultural identity is shaped differently across populations.

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Consumer Preferences for African Prints

across Age Groups in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions and preferences of African print consumers across different age groups in Southwest Nigeria. The study examined the relationship between cultural, social, and economic factors shaping consumer choices of African print fabric usage. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating a quantitative online survey with qualitative focus group discussion. The research instruments were validated through expert review, pilot testing, and reliability analysis, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.86, which confirmed strong internal consistency. A sample size of 384 was determined using an online sample size calculator. The online questionnaire was distributed across the six states of the region which yielded responses from 384 consumers. Participants from all age groups and states were represented but younger and more digitally active respondents were more represented due to the mode of data collection. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores, were used to summarise socio-demographic patterns and address the objectives while the Kruskal–Wallis H test was used for the inferential statistics to test the hypotheses. The qualitative data gathered during the focus groups discussion provided deeper context to the statistical findings. The study revealed that African prints have positive perception across all age groups in Nigeria. It was also discovered that although African prints are perceived as suitable for all age groups, preferences for design features vary by age. The study revealed among others, that the younger generation prefer to use African prints for hybrid fashion, that is, combining it with other modern fabrics while the older generation prefer the primitive method of styling the fabric. The study recommends that African print designers adopt a user-centred design approach, tailoring styles to age-specific preferences while promoting the cross-generational appeal of African prints.

Keywords: African Print, Perception, Preference, Age groups, Southwest, Nigeria

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Introduction

In the global fashion industry, textiles are not mere articles of clothing, they are cultural items and symbols of identity with a potentials for economic drive. Among these, wax-resist dyed textiles, produced mechanically, popularly known as African prints, have gained significant international recognition (Kalilu and Adeoti, 2023:241). These fabrics originated from Indonesian batik and were introduced to West Africa through colonial trade networks. Over time, they have been adopted, indigenized, and transformed into vibrant expressions of African creativity and cultural pride. African prints, a term used to describe vibrant-coloured textiles, produced mechanically using the wax-resist dyeing method, is a major component of African fashion. It reflects the rich cultural heritage of the Africa and also the dynamic evolution of global fashion trends. African prints stand out as a powerful expression of cultural identity and creativity (Adeoti, 2023:130).

In Africa, these prints hold a complex duality. Although they are symbols of African identity, they are also commercially produced outside the continent, particularly in Europe and Asia (Adepeko, Oyinloye, Adepeko and Adeloye, 2023:80). African prints have therefore sparked scholarly debate around authenticity, ownership, and postcolonial identity. Several studies have examined how these textiles contribute to national and regional identities across Africa, with particular attention to their role in social rituals, political statements, and everyday fashion. Kalilu and Adeoti (2023:243) noted that despite the complex duality of African prints, they are essential articles of clothing for a viable economy, globally. They are patronized by individuals in Africa and beyond, regardless of their social, economic, or political status. African prints portray the rich culture of Africa and provide a sense of belonging in society. Chichi, Howard, and Baines (2016:8) identified brand loyalty, quality, symbolism, cultural significance, design ingenuity, and the adaptability of print designs to fashion styles, as well as certain design features, such as colour scheme, pattern size, and layout as factors influencing the marketability and acceptability of African prints locally and internationally.

Nigeria is a major fashion market in sub-Saharan Africa and African print fabrics stands out as one fabric generally accepted across most ethnic groups in Nigeria particularly among the Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria (Kalilu and Adeoti, 2023:233). Fashion in Southwest Nigeria is known for preservation of traditional values harmonized with contemporary influences. This shapes the fashion preferences of people in this region. African prints have a deep-rooted history in Nigeria. These fabrics are used for both casual and ceremonial purposes (Adeloye, Akinbogun and Ogunduyile, 2023:34). Fashion choices are not made in isolation. They are linked to the social and cultural environment in which individuals exist. In Nigeria, fashion choices, including the preference for specific African prints, are influenced by cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and social norms (Essel, 2017:41). Chichi, Howard, and Baines (2016:7) noted that globalization and digital media have introduced a varieties of styles and trends, shaping the preferences of younger generations while simultaneously influencing the choices of elderly.

Essel (2017:41), Adeloye, Akinbogun, and Ogunduyile (2023:39) and Kalilu and Adeoti (2023:238) among other scholars have investigated how fashion choices in Nigeria are shaped by religion, tradition, and social class. However, most studies focus on generalized national trends without specific interest on consumer motivations across demographic segments and age groups. It is important to understand the perception of African print users across age groups so as to facilitate the production of user-centric designs. This study contributes to the textile and fashion industry by offering insights that can inform prod-

uct development, marketing strategies, and cultural branding. It also extends to the field of consumer behavior by examining how cultural heritage and contemporary influences intersect to shape fashion preferences. This study holds potential relevance for designers, manufacturers, and policymakers in the textile industry.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Compare the perceptions of African print users across different age groups in South-west Nigeria
2. Highlight the preferences of African print users across different age groups in Nigeria.
3. Explore in-depth consumer motivations behind African print preferences across age groups

Hypothesis

H0: There is no significant difference in the perception that African print fabrics are suitable for all age groups across

Literature Review

Historical Significance of African Prints in Nigeria

African prints commonly referred to as Ankara by the Yoruba people in Southwest Nigeria, have a deep-rooted historical significance in Nigeria's rich culture. The origins of these prints can be traced back to Indonesian batik, which European traders introduced to West Africa in the 19th century. Over time, African print designers have infused these imported fabrics with local motifs and designs, creating a unique blend that aligns with the cultural diversity of the region (Adeloje, Ogunduyile and Akinbogun, 2022:36). During the colonial era, European textile companies started producing imitation wax prints to meet the growing demand in West Africa. These prints were cheaper than the Indonesian originals which made them accessible to a wider scope of consumers. Despite being of foreign origin, these fabrics became symbols of African identity. The vibrant patterns and bold colors of African prints were embraced by various ethnic groups in Nigeria which led a cultural synthesis where traditional African aesthetics merged with foreign imports (Chichi, Howard and Baines, 2016:8).

African prints quickly became an integral medium for African identity and cultural expression. They became woven into the fabric of Nigerian society, adorning individuals during significant ceremonies, rites of passage, and everyday life. African prints often carry specific meanings and symbols, reflecting the wearer's cultural heritage, marital status, or social standing. These fabrics are also powerful mediums for storytelling and cultural preservation (Uqalo, 2015:24). In post-colonial Nigeria, the textile industry boomed, and African prints played a crucial role in economic empowerment as African print mills were established in different locations in the country. Local entrepreneurs seized the opportunity, establishing textile businesses that catered to the growing demand for these prints. This entrepreneurial drive influenced the emergence of a vibrant fashion industry, creating jobs and contributing significantly to the country's economy (Adeloje, 2021:100). In recent times, there has been a resurgence of interest in African prints both within Nigeria and globally. Contemporary fashion designers have embraced African prints, integrating them into modern designs and runway collections. This promotes Nigeria's cultural heritage and also fosters a sense of national identity and pride.

Cultural and Societal Influences on Fashion Preferences

Fashion preferences are multifaceted, shaped by different factors including cultural and societal influences. Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups, each with its unique customs and traditional attire. Cultural diversity significantly impacts fashion preferences, with individuals often expressing their cultural identity through clothing (Grant and Stephen, 2005:53). Traditional garments, such as African prints, Yoruba Aso Oke or the Igbo Isiagu, are not merely pieces of clothing but powerful symbols of cultural pride and heritage. These garments often find their way into contemporary fashion, reflecting the fusion of tradition and modernity. Ceremonial events such as weddings, festivals, and religious celebrations, play a major role in shaping fashion preferences. Traditional ceremonies often dictate specific dress codes, leading to a demand for culturally significant attire (Atthaphon and Patcha, 2022:122).

The increase in the use of media, especially television, social media, and fashion magazines, has a profound impact on shaping fashion preferences (Adelaja, Salusso and Black, 2016:5). Nigerian youth, in particular, are heavily influenced by global fashion trends shared through digital platforms. Social media influencers and celebrities often set trends, leading to the adoption of specific styles, fabrics, and patterns. This globalization of fashion creates a dynamic synergy between traditional Nigerian fashion and contemporary global influences (Jin and Black, 2012:5).

Economic status also significantly influences fashion choices. Affluent individuals often prefer designer labels and high-end fashion while those with limited financial resources opt for affordable, mass-produced clothing. This economic inequality creates a diverse fashion strata, where both traditional handmade garments and factory-produced clothing coexist. The growth of the fashion industry in Nigeria has led to the availability of a wide range of clothing options, catering to various economic backgrounds and tastes (Nwafor, 2011:55).

Fashion preferences evolve across generations with younger individuals often embracing modern styles that blend traditional elements with contemporary designs. The younger generation's exposure to global fashion trends, coupled with their desire for self-expression, leads to innovative fashion choices. In contrast, older generations often maintain a stronger connection to traditional attire, valuing the preservation of cultural heritage through their clothing choices (Oyedele and Babatunde, 2013:168).

Consumer Behavior and Fashion Preferences in Nigeria

Understanding consumer behavior and fashion preferences in Nigeria is crucial for businesses, designers, and policymakers aiming to cater to the diverse and dynamic fashion market in the country. Nigerian consumers exhibit unique patterns of behavior influenced by cultural, social, economic, and psychological factors. Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage profoundly influences consumer preferences. Traditional attire, rich in symbolism and history, remains a significant choice for various occasions. Cultural pride often drives consumers to opt for garments representing their ethnic backgrounds, leading to a thriving market for traditional textiles like Aso Oke, Ankara, and Adire (Udegbe, 2017:5).

Consumer spending in Nigeria is stratified based on income levels. Affluent consumers often prefer luxury brands and designer wear, showcasing their social status and affluence.

In contrast, middle-income and lower-income consumers opt for more affordable options, leading to a thriving market for mass-produced, cost-effective fashion (Durmaz, Celik and Orac, 2019:112).

Fashion serves as a powerful medium for self-expression in Nigeria. Consumers use clothing and accessories to express their personalities, beliefs, and aspirations. Younger generations, especially, embrace individualism, experimenting with eclectic styles that blend traditional and contemporary elements. This desire for self-expression fuels a constant demand for unique, personalized fashion items (Arnold and Thomson, 2015:212). The rise of social media platforms has transformed consumer behavior in Nigeria. Influencers and celebrities on platforms like Instagram and TikTok heavily impact fashion trends. Consumers often emulate the styles of their favorite influencers, leading to the rapid diffusion of trends and a high demand for specific clothing items showcased online (Udegbe, 2017:6).

Factors Influencing African Print Preference in Nigeria

African prints serve as a powerful symbol of cultural heritage and identity in Nigeria. Different ethnic groups have distinct textile traditions, and individuals often choose prints that reflect their cultural background. The choice of specific patterns and motifs can signify one's tribe, heritage, or even social status, making cultural identity a fundamental factor in African print preference (Adeloye, 2021; Adeoti, 2023).

Traditional ceremonies and events play a significant role in driving African print preference. Events like weddings, festivals, and cultural celebrations often necessitate the use of specific prints and designs. Tradition dictates attire choices, making African prints a popular and essential choice for such occasions. The ceremonial significance attached to these prints enhances their demand and relevance (Essel, 2017:48).

Socio-economic status significantly influences African print preference. Affluent people might opt for expensive African print fabrics, emphasizing their social status and financial capacity. Middle-income consumers often choose mid-range options, while those with lower incomes prefer affordable, cheap prints. Socio-economic factors also impact the choice between handmade traditional prints and factory-produced designs (Uqalo, 2015:30).

Fashion trends, often disseminated through social media, celebrities, and fashion influencers, greatly influence consumer choices. Popular figures showcasing African prints in innovative ways or endorsing specific designs can spark trends. Consumers use clothing, including African prints, as a means of self-expression. Individual tastes, style preferences, and comfort are vital factors. Some individuals prefer bold and vibrant prints, while others opt for more subtle designs. Personal preferences, influenced by personality traits, experiences, and aspirations, guide consumers in choosing specific African print garments that resonate with their identity (Adepeko et al, 2023:79).

Perceived quality, including factors like fabric durability, colourfastness, and overall comfort, greatly impacts preferences. Consumers tend to favour prints made from high-quality materials, ensuring longevity and comfort during wear. Positive past experiences with specific brands or designers can also influence future choices, creating brand loyalty and trust among consumers (Kalilu and Adeoti, 2023:130).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine consumer perceptions and preferences for African print fabrics across age groups in South-West Nigeria. The methodological stages are presented and justified below.

Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining quantitative survey methods with qualitative focus-group inquiry. The quantitative component provided systematic measures of socio-demographic characteristics and stated perceptions and preferences, suitable for statistical testing, while the qualitative component offered depth and context, revealing motivations and interpretations that lie beyond closed-ended items. This design was chosen to ensure that the findings are statistically robust and also supported with qualitative narratives from selected respondents. The approach ensured that the research did not rely solely on quantitative measures, but also harnessed the depth of qualitative evidence to provide a more credible data for the research.

Research Population

The study population comprised consumers of African print fabrics in the six states of South-West Nigeria: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size for this study was determined using an online sample size calculator (Raosoft Sample Size Calculator). Since there is no official record of the total number of African print consumers in South-Western Nigeria, the target population size was treated as large and undefined. The following parameters were applied: a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and an estimated response distribution of 50%. These parameters were selected to maximise statistical reliability and ensure a feasible sample size for fieldwork. Based on these settings, the online calculator recommended a minimum sample size of 384 respondents. Therefore, 384 respondents were sampled for this study.

Sampling Technique and Procedure

Due to the broad geographic coverage of South-West Nigeria and the desire to reach a dispersed population of African print consumers, the primary mode of administration was online distribution of the questionnaire. Links to the survey were shared via social media platforms to facilitate wide and cost-effective reach. Respondents were those with internet access and a willingness to complete the survey, potentially skewing the sample toward more digitally active consumers. Younger respondents, particularly those aged 21–30 years were more represented, reflecting their higher social media usage and greater likelihood of engaging with online surveys. Given this response pattern, the study treated age group as an independent variable of interest rather than a controlled quota variable. The online sampling approach was selected because it ensured wide coverage and was cost-effective, even though it limited strict proportionality in age representation.

Data Collection Instruments

Two main instruments were used to collect primary data for this study: online questionnaire and focus group discussion. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics as well as their perceptions and preferenc-

es for African print fabrics. It consisted of both categorical items and five-point Likert scale statements, enabling quantitative analysis of attitudes and preferences. The focus group discussion was used to complement the survey by eliciting richer, qualitative insights. These instruments were carefully selected to ensure they captured both measurable trends and deeper, context-specific perspectives relevant to the study.

The research instruments were validated to ensure accuracy and reliability. Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in textile design and consumer behaviour who assessed the clarity, relevance, and coverage of the items. Based on their feedback, adjustments were made to improve question wording and alignment with the study objectives. A pilot test involving 20 respondents was conducted to evaluate the clarity, usability, and timing of the questionnaire, leading to further refinements. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha produced a coefficient of 0.86, this indicates strong internal consistency of the scale. These steps ensured that the instruments were both valid and reliable for capturing respondents' perceptions and preferences on African print fabrics.

Data Processing and Analysis

Quantitative data from the online questionnaires were downloaded from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel, cleaned to remove incomplete responses, and then imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were used to summarise socio-demographic characteristics and identify general trends in perceptions and preferences. Hypothesis testing was carried out using the Kruskal–Wallis H test for differences in ordinal perception scores across age groups. For the qualitative component, data were obtained through focus group discussions. Due to the participants' preference, detailed note-taking was used to capture participants' responses. The notes were then reviewed, organised, and analysed thematically using narrative method. Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative results was performed to ensure a richer and more credible interpretation of the study's outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards throughout its design and implementation. All participants were fully informed about the objectives, procedures, and potential implications of the research before taking part. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. No personal identifiers were included in the dataset, and all responses were reported in aggregate form to prevent the identification of individuals. The study also observed cultural sensitivity, ensuring that questions were phrased appropriately and that participation did not cause discomfort or offence.

Results

Socio-Cultural and Economic Life of South-West Nigeria

South West Nigeria is predominantly inhabited by the Yoruba ethnic group, one of the largest and most culturally influential groups in West Africa (Adepeko et al, 2023:76). The region comprises of six states, namely; Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti. Yoruba society is deeply rooted in communal values and respect for age and hierarchy. Festivals such as the

Osun-Osogbo Festival, Eyo Festival, and various Egungun masquerade celebrations reveals that the Yoruba people in South West Nigeria have value for artistic heritage. Researches proof that, South West Nigeria is one of the most commercially advanced regions in Nigeria, with Lagos serving as Nigeria's economic hub and a major West African trade centre. The economy is diverse, comprising of commerce, manufacturing, services, agriculture, and the creative industry.

Socio-Demographic Data of Respondents

The study involved 384 respondents from South-West Nigeria. Figure 1 shows that most participants were between 21–30 years (53.6%), followed by those aged 14–20 years (18.0%) and 31–40 years (15.9%), with smaller proportions in the 41–50 years (5.5%) and above 50 years (6.8%) categories. The gender distribution was fairly balanced, with 51.3% male and 47.9% female respondents. Respondents were drawn from all six states in the region, though Ondo State (41.4%) and Lagos State (28.6%) had the highest representation, while Osun (4.4%) recorded the least. Educational attainment was generally high, with 59.1% holding a Bachelor's degree, 17.2% a Master's degree, 13.0% an SSCE, 8.1% a Diploma, and 2.3% a PhD.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Age	14-20	69	18.0
	21-30	206	53.6
	31-40	61	15.9
	41-50	21	5.5
	Above 50	26	6.8
Gender	Male	197	51.3
	Female	184	47.9
State	Ondo	159	41.4
	Ekiti	30	7.8
	Osun	17	4.4
	Ogun	31	8.1
	Lagos	110	28.6
	Oyo	37	9.6
Qualification	SSCE	50	13.0
	Diploma	31	8.1
	BSc	227	59.1
	MSc	66	17.2
	PhD	9	2.3

Figure 1. Table of the Socio-Demographic Data of Respondents. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2019.

It can be inferred from the above table that respondents from all states in South-West Nigeria and across all age groups were represented, with a relatively balanced gender distribution and a high level of educational attainment. However, the representation across age groups and states was uneven, largely due to the online administration of the questionnaire, which favoured responses from more digitally active populations.

Comparison of Perceptions of Consumers of African prints across the Sampled Age Groups in Southwest Nigeria

Figure 2 reveals that the love for African prints cuts across the sampled age groups as the mean scores show that they all strongly agreed that they love African prints. Respondents across all the age groups also strongly agreed that African prints are highly fashionable and attractive. The mean scores from Figure 2 show that respondents in all the age groups agreed that African prints are suitable for all social gatherings. None of the age groups strongly agreed that African prints are suitable for all social gatherings. Respondents in all the age groups strongly agreed that African prints are suitable for all age groups and social statuses. However, respondents between 14- 20 years old and 21-30 years old were neutral about the price of African prints, this is probably because respondents within this age groups are still largely dependent on parents and guardians while those between 31-40 years, 41-50 years and those above 50 years disagreed that African prints are expensive. This suggests that they believe the prices they purchase the fabrics are fair. Respondents across the age groups are neutral about foreign African prints being better than the indigenous ones, however respondents above 50 years old agreed that foreign African prints are more durable.

Variables	14-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	Above 50
Love for Ankara	4.3	4.3	4.2	4.3	4.5
Highly Fashionable	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.4
Attractive	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.3
Suitable for all Social gatherings	3.6	4.0	3.9	3.7	4.0
Suitable for all age groups	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.3	4.3
Suitable for all social Statuses	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.5	4.5
Expensive	2.8	2.8	2.6	2.3	2.5
Foreign designs are better	2.9	2.9	2.6	2.7	2.9
Foreign designs are more durable	3.0	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.5
Foreign fabrics are cheaper	2.5	2.7	2.4	2.2	2.4

Figure 2. Comparison of Perceptions of Consumers of African prints across the Sampled Age Groups in Southwest Nigeria. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2019.

Figure 2 clearly shows that respondents across the sampled age groups have similar perceptions about African prints. There is no area of strong divergence in their perceptions about African prints. Consumers of African prints across all age groups have positive perceptions about African prints. It could also be deduced that consumers across the age groups do not rate foreign fabrics better than indigenous ones in terms of design, quality and price except for respondents above fifty years old that are of the opinion that foreign African prints are more durable.

The similarities in the perception of African print users about African prints across all age groups is probably because African print is generally accepted by users across all age groups. However, African print users above 50 years old have a slightly different view from others about the durability of foreign African fabric. This is most likely due to a higher level of familiarity with indigenous and foreign African prints.

Comparison of Preferences of Consumers of African prints across the Sampled Age Groups
Figure 3 shows that respondents between 14-20 years old and those above 50 years old are neutral about their level of knowledge of African prints while those between the ages of 21-30, 31-40 and 41-50 agreed to be knowledgeable about African prints. Respondents between 41-50 years old strongly agreed that they are interested in the brand of African fabrics they use while the other age groups simply agreed. Respondents across all the age group agreed that they are more interested in the designs of African prints than the brands. Respondents between 14-20 years old agreed to love designs with dark colours while respondents in other age groups were neutral about the use of dark colours for African print designs. Respondents in all the age groups agreed to love designs with bright colours. Respondents between 14-20 years old agreed to love African print designs with bright colours while the other age groups were neutral about the use of bright colours in African print designs. Respondents between 14-20 years old and those between 21-30 years old agreed to love African prints with cultural designs while others were neutral about their preference for cultural designs. Respondents between the age of 40 and 50 were neutral about their preference for bold motifs and wax effect on African prints while others agreed to prefer designs with bold motifs and wax effects. Respondents in all the age groups agreed to love African print designs with Adire designs. Respondents across all the age groups were neutral about their preference for foreign brands of African prints.

Variables	14-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	Above 50
Knowledge of African prints	3.2	3.6	3.9	3.6	3.4
Interested in Brand	3.6	3.6	3.7	4.3	4.1
Interested in Design than brand	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.9	3.7
Love dark colours	3.6	3.3	2.9	2.7	2.7
Love bright colours	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.7	3.8
Love cultural designs	3.9	3.8	3.4	3.4	2.7
Bold motifs	3.6	3.8	3.5	3.2	3.6
Wax effect	3.5	3.7	3.5	3.4	3.8
Adire imitation	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.9	3.6
Country of Production	2.8	2.6	2.8	2.6	3.0
Prefer foreign brands	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.7

Figure 3. Table comparing the Preferences of Consumers of African prints across the Sampled Age Groups. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2019.

The table in figure 3 shows the level of agreement and divergence of opinions in preferences for African prints. All the respondents across the age groups are relatively knowledgeable about African prints. However, respondents between the ages of 31 – 40 are the

most knowledgeable about African prints while those between 14-20 years are the least knowledgeable. This is probably because most African print users between the age of 14 and 20 years are still dependent on their parents or guardians to make their fabric choices for them while those in their middle adulthood (31-40 years) are in the position to make decisions about choice of fabric for themselves, their children and friends. This tends to enhance their knowledge about African prints. Older consumers are more interested in brands than the younger consumers. This could be closely linked with their level of experience with different brands. However, they all indicated high level of preference for designs over brands. Younger consumers prefer designs with dominating dark colours while older consumers do not particularly pay attention to designs with dominating dark colours. This could be because older consumers look beyond colours to make design choices. As discussed earlier, they are more knowledgeable about African prints and also more interested in brands than the younger consumers. Respondents across all age groups love African print designs with bright colours. The love for cultural designs appears to gradually decrease with age as Table 2 shows that consumers between 14-20 years and 21-30 years love designs with cultural motifs, those between 31-40 and 41-50 years old are neutral and those above 50 years old are the least interested in designs with cultural motifs. This is probably because African print is a convenient textile material through which young people showcase culture unlike the older generations that are convenient with other alternatives like Aso-oke. Consumers across the age groups relatively love bold motifs except for those between 41-50 years old that are indifferent. Consumers across the age groups relatively love wax effect and adire imitation. However, consumers above 50 years are the most interested in wax effect while those between 41-50 years old are the most interested in adire imitation. This is probably because wax effect is a major feature of the African print designs that were originally introduced to Nigeria (Uqalo, 2015) and the indigenous nature of Adire designs makes its imitation on African prints more appealing to older consumers. All age groups are neutral about preference for foreign brands. They do not focus on the country of production of African prints. This could be because the quality of African prints and designs is not dependent on country of production.

Consumer Motivations Behind African Print Fabric Preferences Across Age Groups

To explore in-depth motivations behind consumer preferences for African print fabric, a single focus group was conducted with ten participants, comprising two individuals from each of the age categories. The group comprised of five females and five males, both genders were represented in all age categories. The result of the focus group is presented using narrative analysis. The narrative themes include Identity and cultural belonging, fashion, symbolism, economic and brand consideration and sentiments.

Identity and Cultural Belonging

A nineteen years old female said wearing African print fabric enables her to identify with her roots, though she likes foreign clothes. A fifty-three year old male, speaking for the older generation said that growing up, they used to wear prints to all kinds of celebration such as naming ceremonies, church anniversaries and birthdays among others. He described African print fabric as one fabric that felt truly indigenous. The younger participants linked their use of African prints with a reconnection to cultural identity while the older participants offered historical continuity in their narratives. They told stories associating prints with family rituals, traditional values, and long-standing community pride. Their narratives suggest that African print fabrics function as cultural item across age groups.

Fashion

A twenty-four years old female stated that she likes mixing African print fabrics with jeans or crop tops, she believes this combination makes her more youthful while a forty-six years old female said she cannot wear African print fabrics with anything but a matching blouse. She claims that is how she was taught, and she is more comfortable using it like that. The 21–30 age group presented hybrid fashion narratives, blending African prints fabrics with Western styling. Their fashion stories reflect a desire for creativity and individuality. On the other hand, the 41–50 group emphasized cultural appropriateness. Their stories centered on preserving what they believe as the right way of wear African prints. The younger consumers aim to modernize African prints fabrics, while older consumers preserve the cultural way of styling the fabric.

Symbolism

A thirty-six years old male noted that he when he wears certain motifs, he remembers his grandmother because some patterns remind him of old times spent with her. A fifty-five years old female was of the opinion that bold motifs are more culturally significant because they are not just designs but communicative. Among respondents above 30 years, narratives were rich in symbolic references. They spoke of certain motifs representing proverbs, ethnic origins, or social class. African print fabrics were described as fabrics with coded messages. Younger groups, however, rarely mentioned symbolism. They emphasized visual appeal and colours.

Economic and Brand Considerations

A twenty-two years old male said that he does not consider brands but buys what looks good and affordable. On the other hand, A 50 years old male emphasized on the importance of quality, he however stated that quality is not absolutely dependent on country of origin but quality of production. He noted that he knows how to identify quality African print fabrics. The 14–30 age groups displayed economic rationality. Their preferences centered on cost and accessibility not brand identity. They are of the opinion that, African prints are fashion commodities, valued more for how they look than where they come from. However, Participants above forty years revealed brand-informed loyalty and historical trust. Their choices are informed by long-standing relationships with certain sellers, knowledge of fabric origin, and quality expectations. These findings suggest that motivations around value differ, younger participants focus on affordability and design, while older participants focus on durability and brand trust.

Sentiment

A thirty-three years old female, said she has an African Print wrapper given to her by her mother when she entered the university that she still wears. Although, it is old, it is special. A fifty years old male stated that the African print fabrics used as uniform by guests during his wedding added colour to the event and he kept extra pieces for his daughters. African print fabrics were described to be more than mere clothes but as symbols of emotion, linked to life events like weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies among others. Participants across all age groups shared this sentiment, but older participants placed more emphasis on preservation and continuity, while younger ones were more focused on current associations.

Hypothesis Test

Inferential analysis was carried out to test the research hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the perception that African print fabrics are suitable for all age groups across. The analysis tested to affirm if there are statistically significant differences in the perception that African print fabrics are suitable for all age groups. Respondents were grouped into five distinct age categories: 14–20 years, 21–30 years, 31–40 years, 41–50 years, and above 50 years. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5), thus producing ordinal data appropriate for non-parametric analysis.

Given the ordinal nature of the variable and the independent nature of the age categories, the Kruskal–Wallis H test was used as a better alternative to one-way ANOVA, which would have required the assumption of normally distributed data. This non-parametric test compares the distribution of ranks between groups to assess whether they originate from the same population. The Kruskal–Wallis H test result is shown in Figure 4 below.

Test Statistics ^{a,b}	
	Ankara fabrics are suitable for all age groups
Kruskal-Wallis H	4.541
Df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.338
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: AgeRange	

Figure 4. The Kruskal–Wallis H test results. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2019.

The test produced a Kruskal–Wallis H statistic of 4.541 with 4 degrees of freedom and an associated p-value of 0.338. Since the p-value exceeded the 0.05 threshold, the null hypothesis could not be rejected. This outcome indicates that there are no statistically significant differences in the distribution of perception scores across the different age groups. It can therefore be deduced from the test that respondents across all age groups expressed similar levels of agreement that African print fabrics are suitable for all age groups.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a high level of uniformity in the use of African print fabrics across different age groups in Southwest Nigeria. Across all sampled age categories, ranging from 14–20 years to above 50 years, respondents expressed strong agreement on core attributes such as love for African prints, their fashionable nature, and their attractiveness. The high mean scores for these variables suggest that African print fabrics occupies a central place in the cultural and aesthetic consciousness of consumers across generations. This aligns with the assertions of Uqalo (2015) and Essel (2017) who argued that African prints serve more as cultural emblems that transcend age barriers than as a mere article of clothing. It is also worth noting that the result revealed the absence of statistically significant differences in perceptions of age-suitability in the use of African print fabrics, as confirmed by the Kruskal–Wallis H test ($H = 4.541$, $p = .338$). This suggests that African print fabrics are accepted as appropriate attire for all age groups, highlighting their

role as an intergenerational cultural artifact. The finding resonates with Adelaye (2021), who described African prints as a democratic fabrics in the sense that they are worn by people of all ages, social classes, and for varied occasions. This is further supported by the focus group discussions, which reveal consistent themes of identity, cultural belonging, and sentimental attachment across generations.

The result also revealed that although the broad perception is similar, some differences emerged in the detailed preference patterns. Younger consumers (14–20 and 21–30 years) showed greater affinity for cultural motifs, this can be linked to the role of African prints in youth identity construction and cultural expression. This finding aligns with the submission of Chichi et al (2016), which suggests that younger people often adopt traditional fabrics as fashion statements to blend modernity and tradition. The older respondents however demonstrated higher brand consciousness and a stronger interest in durability attributes likely shaped by long-term experience and established trust in certain manufacturers or sellers, a tendency documented in (Oyedele and Babatunde, 2013). The low mean scores for preference for foreign brands and country of production corroborate Uqalo (2015) submission which found that the quality of design and fabric finishing, rather than geographic origin, is the key determinant of consumer choice.

The symbolic dimension of African prints appears more salient for older participants, who attach specific meanings to motifs and patterns, drawing on historical and cultural references. In contrast, younger participants tend to focus more on aesthetic appeal and fashion versatility, often blending prints with Western attire to create hybrid styles. This generational difference in symbolic engagement reflects broader shifts in African textile consumption documented by Adelaja et al (2016), where the communicative values embedded in patterns are increasingly reduced to fashion sensibilities among younger consumers. Economic considerations further differentiate age groups: younger consumers are more price-sensitive and driven by affordability and trendiness, while older groups prioritize quality and durability, even at higher costs. This mirrors findings by (Arnold and Thomson, 2015), who noted that in emerging markets, income level and life stage significantly influence textile purchase motivations.

The findings suggest that African print fabrics have a positive perception across age groups in Southwest Nigeria. However, there are subtle differences in motivations, colour preferences, symbolic engagement, and brand consciousness. These differences hold strategic implications for textile designers and marketers. Promotional campaigns can confidently emphasize the universal suitability of African prints, while also tailoring specific messages, highlighting cultural symbolism and durability for older consumers, and fashion versatility, affordability, and vibrant designs for younger audiences.

Conclusion

The factors influencing African print preference in Nigeria are multifaceted and interconnected. Cultural heritage, social and economic status, fashion trends, personal preferences, and perceived quality collectively shape consumer choices. It can be concluded that there is a striking consensus among respondents from various age groups regarding their perceptions of African prints. Users of African print across all age groups have positive attitude towards African prints, indicating a shared appreciation and acceptance for African print fabrics across generations. African print users across different age brackets do not exhibit

significant divergence in their opinions about African prints in terms of design, quality, and price. This suggests that the appeal for African prints transcends age-related preferences.

In terms of African print preference across age groups, it can be deduced from the research that older consumers place a higher emphasis on established brands, possibly driven by their extensive experience with different brands. However, the study emphasized that regardless of age, the majority of respondents prioritize designs over brands, underlining importance of creativity in African print production. Younger consumers are drawn to designs dominated by dark colors, while older consumers are drawn to African print designs with bright colours. Interestingly, the research indicated that the affinity for cultural motifs diminishes with age, suggesting that the younger generation are now interested in showcasing their cultural heritage through Indigenous textiles like African prints. The research revealed that regardless of age, respondents do not prioritize the country of production, this suggests that country of origin is not a major determinant of the quality and design of African prints.

It is worthy of note that this study has some limitations. The use of an online survey as the primary data collection method resulted in uneven representation across states and age groups, with younger, more digitally active respondents being more represented. This limited the generalizability of the findings of older or less digitally engaged populations. Qualitative data from the focus group discussion were captured through note-taking rather than audio recording based on participants preference, which, despite careful documentation, may have limited the completeness of the narratives obtained. The cross-sectional nature of the study captures preferences at a single point in time and may not account for evolving trends in African print consumption influenced by seasonal fashions or cultural shifts.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that African print designers should focus on creating contemporary designs that appeal to the younger consumer base while also incorporating classic patterns that older age groups can relate with. It is also recommended that African print designers should adopt user-centered design process in the production of African print fabrics so as to be able to meet the specific demands of consumers.

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Musical Analysis of Chanting Melodies in the Teochew Chinese Yoga Tantra Ritual in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores the musical elements of the Dharma Sankhita chants in the Mahayana Teochew Chinese Yoga Tantra ritual at Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery, Bangkok, Thailand. It examines the ritual's background and musical analysis. Practiced by both Teochew and Cantonese Chinese, the ritual known in Teochew as “Bang Iem Kao” is a profound act of filial piety and ancestor veneration, rooted in the Eight Cardinal Virtues of Chinese ethics. The ceremony is held to dedicate merit to deceased ancestors and preserve cultural traditions. It can be performed at both family and community levels, encouraging intergenerational participation and solidarity. The ritual typically takes place during the seventh lunar month and includes mournful, intense chanting in harmony with the meanings of sacred mantras. The chants are categorized into four rhythmic groups: Jang, Jiu, Gi, and Bung, each with distinct tempos. This musical tradition reflects the deep spiritual beliefs and rich cultural heritage of the Teochew Chinese community.

Keywords: *Teochew Chinese, Yoga Tantra Ritual, Dharma Sankhita Chanting, Ritual Music Analysis, Ancestor Veneration, Thailand*

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Introduction

Buddhism originated in India around 550 BC and has spread over the following 2,000 years to East and Southeast Asia. The Silk Road facilitated its expansion northward into Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan (mostly following beliefs later labeled as Mahayana Buddhism), and it also traveled south to Sri Lanka... and then through the Silk Road to Myanmar, Siam, Malaysia, and Indonesia (as Theravada Buddhism). Both sects share core principles based on the Buddha's teachings, including the five precepts, concentrations, and imparted wisdom, with some regional variations in beliefs, values, and traditions (Pothinantha, 1989:1-15).

Siam and predecessor kingdoms in the region now called Thailand has been ruled by kings for nearly 700 years. Since these earliest times, most of the Thai kings and citizens have adhered to the Theravada of Buddhism. The arrival of Theravada Buddhism into Thailand and related exchanges of culture can be traced to the nation's long history of generally friendly relations with China, which was often based on trade. Indeed, even today many Thai people, including royal family members and commoners, have mixed Thai and Chinese ancestry, and have comingled religious traditions and rituals. One particular belief that Thailand and China have in common revolves around great reverence to one's elders and ancestors, often extended to teachers and monks. Therefore, Chinese-Thai have a ceremony to worship their ancestors every year, when making merit to their dead ancestors is the central focus (Puangphit, 1983:40-43).

As one of the most notable examples of how closely Thai and Chinese people are connected, His Majesty King Rama I, the first king of the Chakri Dynasty, had Chinese ancestry. Moreover, since King Rama IV graciously allowed it, a combination of Buddhist ceremonies – Chinese Mahayana along with Thai traditional ceremonies – have been openly practiced in Thailand. Notable examples include the royal ceremony paying homage to the Buddha image on Chinese New Year, and Kongtek ceremonies, which are the highly ritualized cremation ceremonies honoring royal family members, even a Thai King or Queen.

Mahayana Buddhism was established in mainland China, where the Buddha was the central revered figure, but the traditions and ceremonies varied greatly depending on the community and locality of residence, especially for Chinese people in the three southern regions – Chaozhou, Hainan, and Guangdong. Over the past 200-300 years, many Chinese people from these regions in particular have migrated to Siam, took Thai names, married Thai people, established families, and eventually became deeply integrated into Thai society.

The three groups of Mahayana Buddhist traditions from China differ somewhat in their ritual practices and beliefs. What is most evident is respect and reverence for things that cannot be seen, including spirits, ancestral ghosts, animal ghosts, and many other types of ghosts. Ceremonies, prayers, and things that are respected differ according to their status and the related beliefs. Therefore, although Buddhist worship has evolved and organized in a systematic way, the prayers, chants, and related melodies may not be the same since they are inherited from different ethnic language groups. The Chinese popularly perform the Yoga Tantra ritual to express filial piety for a wide range of purposes, from family-level

observances to community-wide collaborations, all aimed at dedicating merit to ancestors and other spirits, so that they may jointly receive the benefits of the good deeds, in accordance with Chinese beliefs.

Historical evidence indicates that the Yoga Tantra ritual began during the reign of King Rama IV, most notably as one of the rituals performed in 1852 during the Kongtek ceremony, the cremation of King Rama III (Yumangmee, 2017:106). Later, during the reign of King Rama V, Chinese Mahayana monks traveled to spread Buddhism for the first time in the Kingdom of Siam known as Phra Vajrajan Sok Heng. Adhering to the strict and long-respected practices of Dharma, Chinese Buddhists living in Thailand joined together to build a temple to serve as a residence for traveling Chinese monks. When the temple was completed, it was given a royal name in Thai, “Wat Bamphen Chin Phrot,” as well as a name in Teochew, “Yong Hok Yi Temple.” Increasing numbers of Chinese monks from the Guangdong Province traveled to Thailand to perform religious activities. This led to construction of Wat Mangkon Kamalawat, also known as Leng Noei Yi Temple, established by King Rama V. The Chinese monk, Sak Heng, was appointed as the head monk of the Chinese sect, and named Phra Vajrajan Chin Wang Sasamativat (Chinese Sangha Sect, 2008:53-54). Many other monks from Chaozhou Province, China, also traveled to Thailand seeking to spread Buddhism, but they stayed at other shrines or monasteries, where Teochew Chinese monks practiced Dharma, particularly at Leng Hua Huek Ka Xia Monastery and Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery (覺園唸佛林), also known as Mokkhapalaram Monastery and Neiguang Monastery, as well as other locations (Sek Pung Chong, 2018).

This history of how Chinese-based Buddhist traditions arrived and spread in Thailand helps to explain how two related but different religious practices developed. Notably, the chanting of Dharma Sankhita and the performance of various other ceremonies are divided into two main forms: Cantonese and Teochew. The Cantonese Yoga Tantra ritual is still done in various Chinese temples in Thailand, but the Teochew Yoga Tantra ritual can still be seen only at the Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery. The researcher’s interest in studying the Teochew Yoga Tantra ritual led to his participation in the ceremony at this monastery in 2016, and prompted this research project.

Objectives

To study the musical value and Buddhist value in the Teochew Yoga Tantra ritual.

Background

The Teochew Yoga Tantra ritual was originally called the Yoga Tantra Pretaphli ritual, also known as “Ullambana Sutram” in Sanskrit and “Bang Iem Kao” in Teochew. Chinese people who adhere to these precepts engage in this ritual by giving alms to the departed souls in the Three Realms of Miserable Existence, according to the beliefs of Mahayana Buddhism: 1. The realm of hell – a place of torture for evil spirits; 2. The realm of hungry ghosts – a world full of hunger and suffering of people who have done many bad deeds physically, verbally, and mentally when they were alive, so that when they die their spirits will be stuck and unable to escape from this world; and 3. The realm of animals – the realm of general beasts that need to rely on the merit of the Lord Buddha and Bodhisattva. Yoga Tantra is considered as a Mahayana Buddhist ritual with high sacredness and great merit. In practice, this ritual can be performed on both auspicious and inauspicious occasions.

Hungry ghosts (Pret) in Mahayana Buddhism is a type of hell creature, which must suffer repeatedly as a result of bad karma caused by greed, anger, and delusion... until the karma is freed. Hiuen-Tsang translated the message about hungry ghosts in the Abhidhamma Pitaka. Hungry ghosts are due to acts of evil, vengeance, jealousy, and bad words by people when they were alive, which caused others to suffer and created a lot of bad karma. These ghosts have hideous appearances: some are as tall as a palm tree, with a mouth shaped like hole of a needle; some are rotten-headed ghosts with a belly as big as a barn; and some ghosts eat feces – these tormented hungry ghosts cannot receive merit from anyone. The ghosts live in the world of ghosts called Pretavisaibhumi (Realm of Hungry Ghosts) ... a world of hunger, thirst, and suffering. They have no place to stay and experience never-ending suffering (Photinantha, 1969:3). Based on the Mahayana Buddhist beliefs, in order to help these hungry ghosts and demons, it is necessary to perform a ritual called Yoga Tantra, which is followed to dedicate merit on behalf of the tormented demons, consistent with the legend and traditions of the ritual.

Yoga Tantra ritual in Thailand is often called the “Basket Throwing Ceremony” with the same purpose as expressed in Teochew Chinese. The full-scale Kongtek ceremony first took place in 1852, during the reign of King Rama IV, as part of the royal cremation ceremony honoring King Rama III. The full-scale ceremony lasted seven days and seven nights, according to the Rattanakosin Chronicles of King Rama IV (Figure1) (Yumangmee, 2017:106-121).

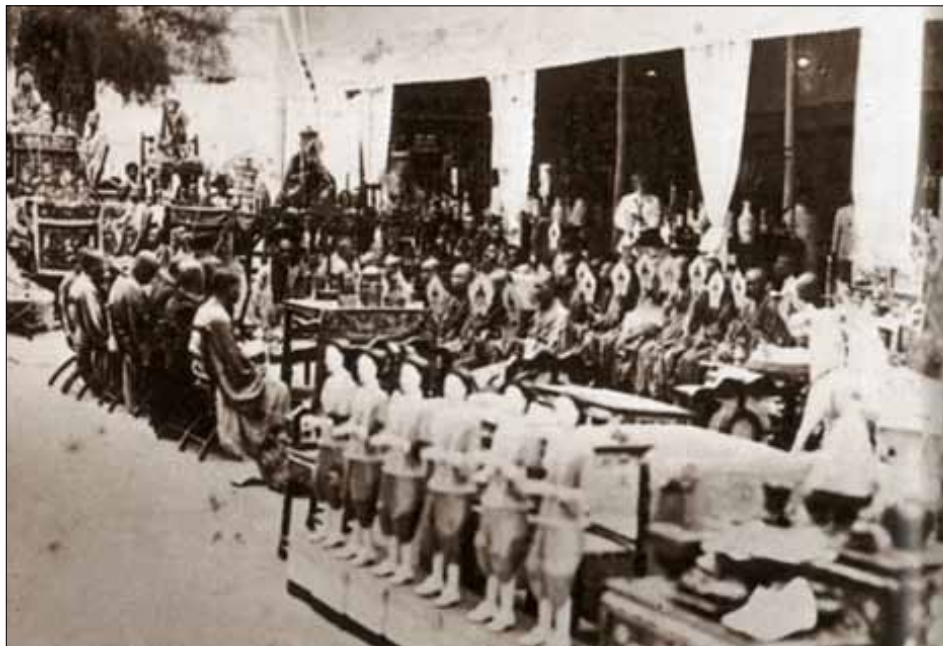


Figure 1. Kongtek ceremony at the Royal Cremation Ceremony of Her Royal Highness Princess Sripacharinthra, the Queen Mother (Image from the National Library) from the Arts and Culture Journal (November 2016 issue).

The Yoga Tantra Ritual, as performed during the Kongtek ceremony, is popular and may be followed by the general public, but it is done on a smaller scale compared to the royal ceremonies; the scale and duration of the ceremony varies depending on the status of the person being honored. Those wishing to perform the Kongtek ceremony and Yoga Tantra

Ceremony often choose to perform a combined ritual at the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival, which takes place in the seventh Chinese lunar month.

Methodology

The researcher undertook an ethnographic study, studied relevant research documents, and interviewed experts. Data and rituals were arranged into categories and analyzed in terms of their general context, focusing on the methods observed during the Yoga Tantra ritual, using Western music scores, and presented for descriptive analysis.

The methods adopted were:

1. Study of the Yoga Tantra ritual using both Thai and foreign language texts for basic
2. Study of the Yoga Tantra ritual of Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery, Soi Man Si 1, Bamrung Mueang Road, Bangkok, from two monks: Phra Vajrajan Sek Pueng Chong and Phra Vajrajan Sek Ao Heng
3. Study of the actual rules for performing rituals focusing on the following details:
 - Relevant information regarding religious beliefs, format of chant melodies, ritual music as well as issues of music education and other related details
 - Animated images of the Teochew Yoga Tantra ritual
 - Photographs
 - Audio information [Interview] of people knowledgeable about the Yoga Tantra ritual

Findings

Ritual Format

According to Phra Vajrajarn Sek Pueng Chong (Abbot of Kak Hang Niam Huek Lim Monastery), the practice of Yoga Tantra ritual was inherited from Dharma Master Sek Kuang Qi of the Yuan Jia Yi Monastery, Huilai District, Chaozhou City (Guangdong Province). Modernly, the rules and content of the Sutra have been shortened from the original, as the original full-scale ritual took a long time to perform and required many personnel.

The melodies and chants in the Yoga Tantra ritual of the Teochew Chinese monks are divided into two main melodies: The Xiang Hong Bang melody, developed from the chants of Taoist monks in Chaozhou, China, is no longer used in Yoga Tantra rituals in Thailand. However, the Hiang Hua Bang melody, developed from the chants of Hakka Chinese monks in Chaozhou, is still used in Thailand for Yoga Tantra rituals, most notably at Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery (Sek Pung Chong, 2018). Chants of the Hiang Hua Bang melody changes rhythm and tone to aid pronunciation and understanding, and to maintain the intended meaning of the scripture. The chants and sound patterns, which are unique and beautiful, use high and low tones, short and long sounds, and loud and soft volumes, often accompanied by musical instruments.

The study of the Yoga Tantra ritual, as performed at the Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery, revealed that the format of the ritual involves three main elements:

1. The ritual's main practitioners are divided into three groups. The first group, Phra Vajrajan (上師- siang se) is responsible for leading the chant. The second group involves monks who participate in the ritual by playing musical instruments and accompanying the rhythm and chant, all done in accordance with the Sutra. The third group include laymen, who also participate by playing musical instruments (Figure 2).

2. The ceremonial area is divided into two main types: A temporary ceremonial area (during Kongtek ceremonies) and a permanent ceremonial area (at Chinese temples and monasteries). Both of these areas include sub-ceremonial areas: for the Buddha, Bodhisattava,

and Dharmapala; for Phra Vajrajan to perform the Amartaraja Bohhisattava ritual; and for all spirits (Figure 3).

3. Ritual equipment which includes a Buddha image (placed in front of Phra Vajrajan's altar), Thai food offerings (vegetarian food and fruit), flowers and coins, rice, holy water, rosary beads, scriptures, and rhythmic instruments; and various musical instruments, including a dulcimer, large cymbals, and a big drum with an attached, hanging bell.



Figure 2. Phra Vajrajan leading the chant; participating monks play musical instruments that accompany the rhythm, while chanting mantras according to the Sutra. Photograph by Rachan Sornchai (2016).



Figure 3. Monks performing the ritual at the front of the ceremonial area along with ritual participants; laymen performing on musical instruments, located on the left side of the ritual in this photo. Photograph by Rachan Sornchai (2016).

Yoga Tantra Ritual Rules and Performance Protocols

There must be at least three monks to perform the ritual. Conducting rituals in a monastery requires the presence of a knowledgeable and senior monk, referred to as “Phra Vajra-jan” who presides over the ritual. This senior monk leads while conducting several important activities, such as leading mudra postures and the verbal recitation of mantras, while monks concentrate in their minds to create a vision.

Phra Vajrajan first receives the scripture from a senior monk and then leads the ritual’s practices, including chanting the Dharani and various Buddhist mantras and scriptural verses. The assistant monks help with the chant in response to Phra Vajrajan, specifically by chanting various mantras according to the Sutra, and playing musical instruments to accompany the rhythm. Chanting is performed following a specific melody, and mudra postures (hand signal codes) must fluently comply with the ritual’s regiments. At the same time, musicians play musical instruments following the main melody that Phra Vajrajan simultaneously chants. The chant accompanying the Yoga Tantra is known as “You kae yiam khao xi jiae yiao jib-瑜伽焰口施食要集” an abbreviated version of the Dharani chant, which has 119 short and long Dharma Sankhita chapters altogether; it takes 3 to 4 hours to fully perform the ritual (Kak Hueng Niam Huk Lim, 2018). The place set up to worship the Buddha must consist of various important Bohhisattava and set up Thai offerings for all the animals that will receive merit from this ritual. All food offerings must be distributed as alms after the completion of this ritual. The steps of the Yoga Tantra ritual describing the sequence and ceremonial actions performed to complete the ritual are presented in Figure 4.

Compositions and melodies that appear in the Yoga Tantra Sutra

The compositions of the Yoga Tantra Sutra are considered important works of literature that have been refined over the past hundreds of years. Indeed, over the many years the ceremonial aspects of the ritual have continuously undergone changes (modifications, additions, or reductions) as deemed appropriate by Phra Vajrajan, but it has consistently maintained the same Sanskrit mantra and pronunciations. The essence of the Yoga Tantra Sutra is based on different temples. For this reason, musical melodies have changed or improved, as it passed down through the different temples. However, the core content is divided into two main sections, each comprising “Jang,” “Jiu,” “Ki,” and “Bung” verses, totaling 119 chapters in all.

Section 1 is a chant with melodies and mudra postures used to invite the Buddha, the Bodhisattva, and Dharmapala from the ten directions. The verses of the Lord Buddha, Bodhisattva, and Dharmapala from the ten directions are chanted using an ancient Sanskrit mantra to purify the ceremonial area.

Section 2 is a chant in ancient Sanskrit language to summon the spirits of ghosts, hungry ghosts, and asuras, and with spells to exorcise and subdue evil ghosts, demons, and pagan devils; sermons on ghosts, hungry ghosts, and asuras; and Dhamma incantations, which are magical medicines to allow ghosts, hungry ghosts, and asuras a chance to listen to and practice Dharma in order to be freed from the cycles of suffering and hardship and traveling to Sukhavati.

Sequence of the ritual	Officiant	Rite	Background music	Meaning
1. Open the ritual	-	-	A big drum and a dulcimer are played at the beginning of the ritual.	It is a signal to start the ritual.
2. Start performing the ritual	Phra Vajrajan and monks	Pay respect to the Buddha image and chant to praise the Buddha's virtues in Lo Hiang Jang, Kai Tia Jin Hiang, Buang Tek Jang, etc.	A big drum and a dulcimer are played as background music for Kai Tia Jin Hiang Jang and Buang Tek Jang.	Praise the Buddha and Bodhisattva
3. Message reading ceremony	Phra Vajrajan	Read the verses and read the Lord Buddha's message	There is no melody.	Read the message, describe the steps in performing the ritual and invite the Buddha
4. Worship ceremony at different altars	Phra Vajrajan and monks	Chant the Buddha's name in a short musical melody	A big drum and a dulcimer are played along with the melody, including the melody of the Nam Mo Oni Tohook.	Commemorate the Buddha and Bodhisattva
5. Ceremony to praise the ceremonial area	Phra Vajrajan and monks	Chant the verses in praise of the ceremonial area	There is no melody.	Invite the Buddha and Bodhisattva to come to the ceremonial area
6. Ceremony to invite Phra Vajrajan to perform the ritual.	Monks	Chant the verses to invite Phra Vajrajan	There is no melody.	Invite Phra Vajrajan to perform the ritual
7. Start of the ritual	Phra Vajrajan and monks	Phra Vajrajan performs various mudras and commences the ritual according to the Yoga Tantra ritual. The core content is divided into two main sections, each comprising "Jang", "Jiu", "Ki", and "Bung" verses, totaling 119 chapters in all.	A big drum and a dulcimer are played as background music for Thian Siang Thian Hia Jang melody, Yiang Ki Jang melody, Huk Ming Jang melody, Kong Yiang Jang melody, etc.	Praise the virtue of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva, and invite hungry ghosts to receive the merit from the ritual
8. Ritual in the Sutra is completed	Phra Vajrajan and monks	Phra Vajrajan finishes reciting the rituals in the Sutra.	A big drum and a dulcimer are played as background music for the mantra. The melodies are Jap Po Ueng Jang and Huai Hiang Kee.	In compliance with the Sutra, when the ritual is completed the Buddha and Bodhisattvas are sent back to their palaces.
9. Ritual in the Sutra is completed	Phra Vajrajan and monks	Phra Vajrajan comes down from the ceremonial altar.	A big drum and a dulcimer are played as a short musical melody while waiting for the chanting.	-
10. Ceremony of chanting and praising Dharmapala	Phra Vajrajan and monks	Phra Vajrajan chants praises to Dharmapala.	A big drum and a dulcimer are played as background music for the mantra.	It is to praise and worship Dharmapala who protects and preserves Buddhism.

Figure 4. Sequence and key ceremonial actions performed during the Yoga Tantra ritual.

The chanting melody of the Teochew Chinese is short and remains consistent throughout the recitation. The vocal range used in chanting is limited; a higher vocal register, similar

to that used in performance singing, is not employed. Instead, the chanting voice is kept at a moderate level, maintaining a harmonious tone and unified direction throughout the ritual. The compositions used in the two main parts of the Yoga Tantra Sutra comprise a total of 119 chapters. These compositions and their associated melodic chants can be categorized into four distinct groups:

1. **The Jang** (讚) is a chant with a specific and clear melody used to praise Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. During the chant, instrumental music is often mixed with the melodies to create a melodious sound, including Luo Heiangzang, Kai Tiejin Heiangzang, Buang Tek Jang.
2. **The Jiu** (咒) is an ancient Sanskrit mantra. In this verse, Phra Vajrajan reads the Sutra and voiced a drawn-out sound to create a melody. Other participants in the ritual give readings which are intermittently performed, with and without instrumental music; the readings include the six-letter mantra of Rajadharani, the Mahakaruna Dharani Sutra, the Ten Bhumi mantras, and the Chundi Maha Bodhisattva mantra.
3. **The Ki** (偈) is a chant written in the form of a descriptive poem, based on stories narrating the kindness of the Buddha and Bodhisattva and describing the suffering of ghosts, hungry ghosts, and asuras. It can be chanted in the form of a reading, with a melody. The chant may or may not include instrumental music. The text of the readings includes the invocation of the Triple Gem, the verse of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, and the verse of the opening ceremony.
4. **The Bung** (文) consists of spoken words with no accompanying music; the content often includes messages or sermons about ghosts, hungry ghosts, and asuras – used to preach and teach, encouraging people to do only good deeds.

Musical and Religious Instruments

The monks who perform the ritual use musical instruments to create rhythms throughout the chant. Various rhythmic instruments are used to create background music (Figure 5):

- The **Bak Hue** is a fish-shaped wooden bamboo musical instrument that is hit with a stick, emitting a hard beat aligned with the sound of the prayer. Sometimes, the beat rhythm might be changed to signal the monks to speed up the melody to proceed to another part or alter the melody to become faster.
- The **Ing Kheng** is a small bell with a handle and a stick that makes a small, sharp sound. The monks beat the rhythm to keep the chants aligned with the melody.
- The **Tong** is a circular bell which is hit by a stick alternating with the Bak Hue to be aligned with the melody or the mantras, or hit against the rhythm to create enjoyment, in a rhythm called "Sikchae."
- The **Kheng** is an inverted bowl-shaped bell, which is hit with a stick when monks begin or end chanting mantras, or before changing mantras as a signal for worshipping the Buddha and Bodhisattva in rituals.
- The **Khandha Bell** is a bell with a pointed top, similar in shape to a dagger, with the function of giving signals – rung when monks summon spirits and for some Sanskrit chants. Sometimes, the bell is rung in time with the tune being used for reading various verses.



Figure 5. Monks' rhythmic instruments (left to right): Bak Hue, Ing Kheng, Tong, Kheng, Khantha bell. Photo by Rachan Sornchai (2022).

In addition to the musical instruments used in the ritual, there are also religious instrument implements that serve as symbolic components of the ritual. The Vajra is a dagger with a pointed top, which the Phra Vajrajan holds while chanting, used to make symbolic hand gestures as signals inviting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to perform the ritual (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The Vajra dagger, which has a pointed top that the Phra Vajrajan can hold. Photo by Rachan Sornchai (2022).

Throughout the ritual, laymen play musical instruments often, Chinese folk instruments, such as a Chinese dulcimer (揚琴 - iang kim) and Chinese fiddle (二胡- ri hu) that carry the melody of the chants with either slow or fast rhythms (Figure 7-8). The music is aligned with the monks' chants, which elevates the beauty of the mantras. A ceremonial drum (a large drum set on a trestle with a small bell hanging at the end of its trestle) is used to direct the chanting from beginning to end of the ceremony. To play the drum, the musician must kneel or sit; the drum head or hanging bell is struck with two wooden sticks, consistent with an ancient rhythm, called the Seven Star Rhythm. In addition to the drumming, large cymbals are played to accentuate the main rhythm and sub-rhythm. (Chongsanguan, 2014).



Figure 7. Musical instruments played by laymen include large cymbals, and a big drum with an attached hanging small bell, used to make melodies. Photograph by Rachan Sornchai (2022).



Figure 8. Laymen playing musical instruments, including a fiddle and a Chinese dulcimer. Photograph by Rachan Sornchai (2022).

Teochew Chinese Chanting Melody Characteristics

In Chinese musical systems, the Teochew chanting style predominantly uses ancient Chinese scales. These include the pentatonic scale (five main notes) and the heptatonic scale

(seven main notes). Additional notes can be raised or lowered as appropriate for the melody. (Pikulski, 1997:69-73.) However, in the case of Teochew Chinese Yoga Tantra ritual music in Thailand, another phenomenon occurs due to varying pitch levels in the chanting, based on the main melody of each sutra. Fundamentally, the structure of the pentatonic and heptatonic scales used remains the same. The changing pitch levels and melodies significantly impact the emotional expression of the music. The use of these primary scale groups involves melodic variations while preserving the traditional five-note and seven-note scale structures of ancient China. These melodies can be categorized to convey different emotions. Combined with accompanying instruments, the music evokes feelings of elegance, vibrancy, sorrow, and delight.

Knowledge of Yoka Tantra Ritual Melodies

To fully analyze and appreciate the details of ceremonial music, it is necessary to consider the text and music together. Both of these structures are an important part of Mahayana Buddhism, and are used to promote a better understanding. Here, Western musical notation symbols and the text are written in English to provide clearer explanations; however, in a chant, the pitch of sounds is much different than the pitch of spoken language, particularly because a different tone of voice can be used to make the chant more melodious. To provide a clearer description of the musical context, selected chant examples from the Jang, Jiu, and Gi categories, as utilized in the ritual, have been presented. In contrast, the Bung chants exhibit a distinct characteristic: they are consistently interspersed within the Jang, Jiu, and Ki sections. The performance of Bung chants strictly adheres to recitation of the Yoka Tantra sutras verbatim, without any melodic ornamentation, vocal chanting, or instrumental accompaniment. Consequently, Bung chants have been excluded from the scope of this musical analysis. Examples of the chants used in the rituals studied include:

Example 1. Luo Hieng Jang Chant

The meaning of the Luo Hieng Jang chant, which represents an important hymn of praise from the "Jang" category is as follows:

"Incense is burned in a hot stove. The fragrant aroma spreads throughout the Dharmadhatu, inviting all the Buddhas to come to join, creating clouds of auspiciousness everywhere. Please concentrate and pray for the Buddha to appear and invite the Bodhisattva Mahasattva to come above the fragrant clouds..."

The Luo Hieng Jang is the first mantra chanted in order to worship the Triple Gem. The chant notation is shown in Figure 9. It is also a basic mantra used by monks to practice chanting. The chant is divided into two parts: a verse of praise, and a worship called "Pu Sag To-菩薩陀," which is done three times. In this particular section, all poetic verses and melodies are entirely in the Jang style. The monastic assembly chants this section together, with the Phra Vajrajan leading the opening chant. Other monks provide rhythmic accompaniment on their instruments. Lay musicians play the dulcimer and drums, accompanying the ritual. Their instrumental performance follows the pitch of the monks' chanting precisely, using the monastics' vocal tones as the guiding reference for their playing. In the basic Teochew chant, which has a unique melody and composition, led by Phra Vajrajan, the chanters must be precise in the structure of the melody, and also control the chant using high and low voices.

Luo Hieng Jang

♩ = 75 ♩ = 80

lou hiang za ruah huab gai mong hang zu hug hai hue seg iao bhung

11 ♩ = 85

sui cu gig siang hung seng i Huang heng zu hug

21

hiang chang sing hiang hung gai pu sag pu sag nam mo mo ho sag nam mo

30 ♩ = 95

hiang hung gai pu sag pu sag nam mo mo ho sag nam mo

37 ♩ = 75

hiang hiang heng gai pu sag pu sag mo sag

Figure 9. The Luo Hieng Jang chant notation by Phra Vajrajan Sek Ao Heng, Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery, Bangkok (Author's transcript, 2017). The red box indicated a short, drawn-out sound within a chant. The yellow and green sections displayed distinct melodies, yet these were played continuously without pause, seamlessly intertwining within a single chant.

Scales:

The major scale for the Lou Hieng Jang chant is a heptatonic (7-note) scale, consisting of C, D, E, F, G, A and B. Notes A and D typically appear in prescribed melodic embellishments. While C often functions as a passing tone. In reference to the Chinese musical system, this aligns with the Kung Mode. All notes are used in rotation, clearly adhering to the Chinese scale structure. The sounds that are used less often are drawn-out, and stretch across each paragraph of the chant, as it has such a short melody (Figure 9) Notably, the F note is predominantly found in scales for Teochew Chinese opera performances. In this particular chant, its presence emphasizes the pronunciation of Teochew Chinese words. This melodic structure can also accommodate numerous other hymns of praise.

Rhythm:

The Luo Hieng Jang chant is characterized by a moderate rhythm. The melody can be arranged using the 2/4 Time Signature, which creates a fuller texture according to the melody. Musicians play instruments and provide harmony, using a moderate rhythm.

Melody:

The Luo Hieng Jang chant clearly features two distinct melodic texture (Homophonic texture) (Figure 9). It emphasizes continuous chanting of these two melodies without pause, highlighting a synchronized delivery to foster concentration and convey the sacredness inherent in describing the Triple Gem. The melodic range typically moves smoothly with

conjunct motion. There are melodic embellishments that bridge phrases within the chant, as well as at the end of each line, connecting it to the next section of the recitation. During the final round of worship the tempo quickens, signaling the completion of the last recitation and the conclusion of the chant.

Example 2. Chab Dou Ying Chant

The Chab Dou Ying, the 14th of 119 chants, is recited in Sanskrit. Its meaning references the opening the ten realms, and it is considered a mystical and sacred chant. This chant represents an important hymn of praise from the "Jiu" category. Transliterated from ancient Sanskrit, it is intended for melodic recitation. This chant is performed solely through intoned recitation and has no instrumental accompaniment. The chant's musical notation is shown in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Chab Dou Ying chant notation by Phra Vajrajan Sek Ao Heng, Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery, Bangkok (Author's transcript, 2017).

Scales:

The Chab Dou Ying chant utilizes a heptatonic (7-note) scale. Its entire melody features drawn-out, embellished recitation, with only the beginning and end of the final melodic phrase being articulated with a distinct, emphasized vocalization. Therefore, the melody is specifically a recitative style that corresponds to the Chinese modal system's "Shang Mode." This mode comprises the notes D, E, F, G, A, B, and C within the Chinese 7-note scale system. However, the note A does not appear in this particular chant, and it is also observed that notes C and G are used infrequently.

Rhythm:

The rhythm of Chap Dou Ying starts out slow and gradually speeds up.

Melody:

The chant of Chap Dou Ying has a distinctive single melodic shape (Monophonic texture), emphasizing a prescribed melodic recitation. It is characterized by its vocal delivery, incorporating melodic embellishments at both the beginning and end of phrases, used particularly when reciting chants derived from Sanskrit. The melodic range generally moves smoothly with conjunct motion, avoiding extreme high or low pitches. Infrequently used notes are sustained as elongated passing tones between each chanted phrase. The presence of F# and B specifically facilitates word pronunciation. In the final phrase, the Phra Vajrajan recitation includes an emphasized, percussive vocalization, and the tempo quickens, signaling the conclusion of the final round of the chant.

Example 3. Pi Lu Ru Lai Chant

The Pi Lu Ru Lai chant, which represents an important hymn of praise from the "Ki" category. The meaning of the quoted verse praising the "Vairocana Buddha," who is considered the primordial Buddha in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism (Sek Ao Heng, 2018)

"Phra Vairocana Buddha who has great wisdom."

The verse praising the Vairocana Buddha is the 23rd of 119 chants. The chant notation is shown in Figure 11. It is a significant short poetic verse found in the Yoga Tantra Sutra.

Pi Lu Ru Lai



Figure 11. Pi Lu Ru Lai chant notation by Phra Vajrajan Sek Ao Heng, Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery, Bangkok (Author's transcript, 2017). The yellow and green sections display two parts; the Phra Vajrajan leads the chant (yellow section) and the monks then following (green section).

Scales:

The Pi Lu Ru Lai chant utilizes a pentatonic (5-note) scale. However, only three main notes Eb, F, and G are primarily used, appearing in the "Chu mode." This mode is particularly suited for chanted recitation, focusing mainly on F and Eb to help the monastic assembly follow along.

Rhythm:

The rhythm of the verse praising of Vairocana Buddha is slow, allowing for elongated, embellished vocalizations.

Melody:

Phra Vajrajan leads the chant in the first verse, which the monks then follow (Figure 10).

The melody is characterized by a recitative style with embellishments, specifically using an embellished vocalization at the beginning of phrases. The end of phrases involves a drawn-out, descending vocalization. The chanting method is as follows:

Part 1: The Phra Vajrajan leads the chant. This initial section states the name of Vairocana Buddha (yellow section in Figure 10). In Western music, this is comparable to an Antecedent phrase, which often feels incomplete or acts like a "question" seeking a response.

Part 2: The monks then follow (green section in Figure 10). This is a hymn of praise to Vairocana Buddha, which, in Western music, is akin to a Consequent phrase that acts as an "answer" or completion to the Antecedent phrase, providing a sense of resolution and finality.

Example 4. Ki Siew Cundi Chant

The meaning of the Ki Siew Cundi chant, which represents an important hymn of praise from the "Jang" and "Jiu" category is as follows:

"I worship Phra Cundi, my refuge, with immeasurable respect. With my praise, may Phra Cundi protect us all"

The Ki Siew Cundi is the 22nd of 119 chants for worshiping the Cundi Bodhisattva according to the Sutra. It is divided into two main parts: The hymn of praise (Jang) and the Sanskrit mantra worship (Jiu), which must be recited three times. Phra Vajrajan leads the chant, and the musicians play music following Phra Vajrajan's leading chant, with subsequent chanting by the monks. The chant notation is shown in Figure 12.

Ki Siew Cundi

♩ = 120

The musical notation is presented in a series of staves, each with a measure number on the left and lyrics below the notes. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 120. The notation is divided into two color-coded sections: a yellow section (Jang style) and a green section (Jiu style).

Yellow Section (Jang style):

- Measures 12-36: gi siu gui i su seg di tao ming deng
- Measures 36-48: rui nguang ce bui chui gia hu
- Measures 48-60: num mho sab do nam sam mieu sam pu to
- Measures 60-68: gi zhi nam dan zhi tuo an zhi

Green Section (Jiu style):

- Measures 68-76: li zu li zhun ti so po ho ho
- Measures 76-84: ho (repeated three times, labeled 1., 2., and 3.)

Figure 12. Ki Siew Cundi notation by Phra Vajrajan Sek Ao Heng, Kak Hang Niam Huk Lim Monastery, Bangkok (Author's transcript, 2017). The praise chant is divided into two parts: the yellow section is a hymn of praise in the "Jang" style, and the green section is a Sanskrit poetic verse in the "Jiu" style.

Scales:

The major scale for the Ki Siew Cundi chant is a heptatonic (7-note) scale, consisting of C, D, E, F, G, A and B, with E and F as drawn-out sounds at the end of “Jang” to connect the melody to the “Jiu” Sanskrit poetic verse, which also uses a drawn-out sound three times at the end. Both the text and the drawn-out sounds are compulsory and cannot be changed to another form. The sound system most clearly matches the Chinese sound mode system, specifically the Kung Mode. The sound can be passed to the secondary sounds D E F A (B). The musicians primarily play music following the melody set by Phra Vajrajan and the monks.

Rhythm:

The Ki Siew Cundi chant is characterized by a moderate rhythm. The melody can be arranged using the 2/4 Time Signature.

Melody:

The Ki Siew Cundi chant clearly features two distinct melodic texture (Homophonic texture). The chanting is prescribed, emphasizing a synchronized performance. The melodic range generally moves smoothly with conjunct motion, without pauses. The Phra Vajrajan employs a distinct, percussive vocalization in the adoration section. Melodic embellishments are used within the phrases, and short embellished endings connect the verses. In the adoration section, the tempo quickens before concluding.

Discussion

This study based on examples of chants and melodies that occur in the Yoga Tantra ritual has shown the influence music has on rituals. Important rhythms and melodies are played in unison, without a chorus that distinguishes a chant from general performance music. In traditional Chinese music, the scale system differs from the Western major/minor scale system. These scales are referred to as “modes,” each named after its fundamental tone. The main mode names are: Kung (C), Shang (D), Chu (E), Bian Zhi (F), Zhi (G), Yu (A), and Bian Gong (B) (Pikulsri, 1997:69-73). Chinese scales can be constructed as either pentatonic (five-note) or heptatonic (seven-note) scales. Other notes can serve as embellishments, enhancing the musicality, and can transition smoothly into other melodies, adding complexity to the musical texture.

The playing of rhythmic instruments during the ritual accentuates emotional imageries. The aesthetics of sweet, melodious melodies, often with a moderate rhythm, connote the worship of Buddha and Bodhisattva. The main musical instruments most often used are a dulcimer and a fiddle during the fast-chant melody, with an emphasis on a heavy sound, or chanting Sanskrit mantras, with heavy rhythms created by using a big drum and large cymbals to communicate the suffering of hungry ghosts. The melody, which uses a sorrowful chant to describe the suffering of the hungry ghosts, may be accompanied by bell-ringing and a sermon to communicate to the spirits, seeking to free them from suffering (Pikulsri, 1997:69-73).

Some parts of the chanting melodies used in the ritual have been adapted and refined from their original forms passed down by previous Phra Vajrajan. These adjustments are made by the Phra Vajrajan to suit the timing and context of modern-day ceremonies, while

the essential and sacred parts of the melodies remain unchanged to preserve the ritual's identity and spiritual core in the Mahayana tradition. Although the text of the Sutra still follows traditional conventions, certain sections of the chant have been modified – such as using shorter and faster melodies to reduce the overall duration. These musical and vocal elements are carefully crafted in harmony with the meaning and rhythm of the chants. In analyzing the music of the ritual, it is essential to consider both the text and melody together, as they are key to deepening the understanding of Mahayana Buddhist teachings. In some cases, Western musical notation and English transliteration are used for clarity, especially when demonstrating how the chanting differs from ordinary speech and includes shifts in pitch and tone for expressive and spiritual purposes (Sek Pung Chong, 2018).

Overall, these observations are consistent with the philosophical observations made by Augustus Comte, a French sociologist, who proposed his ideas regarding socio-cultural theories and social-cultural evolution, which divided society into two parts: social statics and social dynamics. The first presents the idea that the structure of society is a holistic, yet consisting of distinctive institutions or parts of society. Each part of the institution performs its own duties, but in coordination with other parts ... acting in different ways but simultaneously supporting each other and depending on each other. It is this kind of order or consistency of various conditions that allows humans to live in society normally. When one part of society changes, it will have an impact on other parts, which must be adjusted accordingly. Once adjusted harmoniously, society can continue (Comte, 1988:9-15).

In Mahayana Buddhism, the reason monastics are permitted to engage with music without violating monastic discipline is found in the *The Lotus of The True Law* (妙法蓮華經). This text states that even a single short Dharma song can lead the chanter to attain Nirvana (Sek Pung Chong, 2018). This stands in contrast to the ancient tradition upheld by Theravada monks, who believe that music impedes the attainment of Nirvana. This is reflected in the seventh precept for Theravada monastics, which prohibits monks from playing musical instruments, dancing, singing, or performing music. Engaging in these activities incurs a minor offense (dukkata), and even observing them is an offense for a monk (Wannapok, 2018).

Indeed, Mahachati Preaching is a form of sermon delivered with melodic intonation by the preaching monk, without musical accompaniment during the sermon itself. Music played by lay practitioners follows only after the sermon concludes. This is not considered an offense because the chanting serves as a lesson to make listeners aware of both benefits and harm, and to encourage giving, upholding precepts, and developing meditation. Furthermore, it serves to praise the virtues of Prince Vessantara, who was a Bodhisattva in his final incarnation before attaining enlightenment as a Buddha (Inthaniwat, 2021:164-168:).

Conclusion

The principles of the ritual are stated as follows: A religious prophet is a person who preaches moral and ethical teachings, establishes precepts for Buddhists to realize what behavior is appropriate and what is not, and teaches people about good and evil... those who do bad things will go to hell while those who do good will go to heaven when they die. Rituals are therefore important to release the suffering souls to heaven according to the principles of Mahayana Buddhism, by relying on the virtues of the Buddha in the past,

present, and future, and the Bodhisattva who is full of compassion for all beings. Faith and belief in the afterlife are very much evident as reflected in the performance of the Yoga Tantra Yoga ritual. The role of the temple in teaching Buddhism and ensuring its sustainability emphasizes various Dharma principles, such as the eight cardinal virtues: diligence, frugality, honesty, discipline, politeness, cleanliness, unity, and generosity. These virtues are transmitted through rituals. Temples and monks also serve as central hubs for communicating with Buddhists, reflecting the long-standing practice of filial piety towards Chinese ancestors, which fosters unity among Chinese communities, from families to the wider community, who jointly perform the rituals.

In conclusion, the Yoga Tantra ritual is carefully completed by the Phra Vajrajan, who leads the ritual and serves as the focal point. Assistant monks help by chanting and playing rhythmic instruments, aligned with the Sutra. Laymen, playing musical instruments that carry out a harmonious melody aligned with the monks' chants, express or accentuate emotions conveyed by the chants. Combined together, they create imagery and aesthetics according to the meanings found in the scriptures. Finally, what is indispensable in this analysis is the central belief that all has been passed down from many previous generations.

Recommendations

To ensure the preservation of the original Teochew chanting styles, it is important that the rituals and chant are further studied from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. The hope is that if the currently missing Teochew Chinese melodies are meticulously compiled, analyzed, and developed according to proper ethnomusicological principles, then this invaluable knowledge and pure melodies will continue to be transmitted to future generations.

Even as contemporary society emphasizes scientific and technological advancement, often at the expense of spiritual development, the continued existence of the pure art of the Yoga Tantra ritual will maintain its beauty in Thai society. It will foster spiritual prosperity and encourage Thai people of Teochew descent to uphold strong moral values. Continuing to perform and study the Yoga Tantra ritual will preserve Teochew traditions, philology, and cultures, and promote the benefits gained from Buddhist philosophy and ethnomusicology to future generations.

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An Initial Report on the Search for the Missing Gamelan Heritage

*of the Sumenep Palace, Madura,
East Java-Indonesia*

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Abstract

This research endeavors to locate the long-lost heirloom gamelan from the Sumenep Palace. Since the abolition of aristocratic status in 1883, the Sumenep Palace has lost political and economic legitimacy. To maintain the luxurious lifestyle of the aristocratic court, valuable items, including gamelans, were sold. The heirloom gamelans in the Sumenep Palace are believed to have been gifts from the Mataram Palace, often exchanged during various events, such as marriages. Employing an investigative ethnographic approach, this study gathered data through in-depth interviews with cultural practitioners, palace descendants, and private collectors; direct observation of remaining artifacts; and analysis of historical documents and archival records. As a result, the Gamelan Kyai Mega Remeng, over 200 years old, was discovered in the possession of a Chinese descendant, strongly suspected to be one of the missing gamelans from the Sumenep Palace. The gamelan's discovery tells a narrative of the harmonious relationship between the Sumenep Palace and Islamic Mataram in Java, extending beyond conflicts such as war, violence, and betrayal.

Keywords: *Gamelan Heritage, Cultural Investigation, Sumenep Palace, Lost Heirloom, Mega Remeng, Ethnomusicology*

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Introduction

Gamelan is the most popular traditional musical instrument in Java (Indonesia) and has a long history. Initially, gamelan instruments consisted only of gongs and a type of metal xylophone (Pranoto, 2013). However, today, the gamelan is the world's largest percussive musical instrument (Supanggah, 2009). Some of the gamelan instruments are *gong*, *kempul*, *kenong*, *gambang*, *demung*, *saron*, *saron penerus*, *slenthem*, *bonang barung*, *bonang penerus*, *drums*, *rebab*, *gender*, and *kethuk*. Gamelan developed and existed within the walls of the Mataram (Islamic) palace in Java. Gamelan works (commonly called; *gending*), dedicated to the king. So great was the king's majesty and position in Java that his name was mentioned as the composer of the music, even though the real creator was an employee who worked as a court musician (Waridi, 2005).

Playing gamelan (also known as *karawitan*) inside the palace walls is a prestigious profession. These musicians are called *pengrawit* or *niyaga* (Puguh et al., 2020). They get ranks in the form of titles attached to their names, such as (from low to high): *Raden Lurah* (R.L.), *Raden Ngabehi* (R.Ng.), *Raden Tumenggung* (R.T.), *Kanjeng Raden Tumenggung* (K.R.T.). The ranks are based on his ability to play the gamelan. In other words, the gamelan instrument becomes a marker of the hierarchy of a musician's strata or status. For example, *garap* instruments with a more difficult level than other instruments, such as *rebab* and *gender*, are played by high-ranking musicians, namely K.R.T. The rank will also determine how much and how little income one gets from the palace.

The gamelan then became a sacred heirloom. At the Mataram Kasunanan Surakarta Palace, there are *Gamelan Sekaten* named *Kyai Guntur Madu* and *Kyai Guntur Sari*. *Monggang* gamelan instruments are named *Kyai Udanarum*, *Kyai Patolan*, *Kyai Singakrura*, *Kyai Banjar*. The *Gamelan Kodhok Ngorek* is called *Kyai Jatingarang*. *Gamelan Ageng* sets (complete) are *Kyai Kadukmanis*, *Kyai Manisrengga*, *Kyai Kuthawindu*, *Kyai Windusana* and *Kyai Kancil Belik*. In Mangkunegaran, there are several heirloom gamelans named *Kyai Kanyutmesem*, *Kyai Segorowindu*, *Kyai Udan Riris*, *Kyai Baswara*. The same thing happened at the Mataram palace, the Yogyakarta Sultanate. Gamelan became a symbol that strengthened the legitimacy of a king (Becker, 1980). Because of its position, gamelan has also become a means of political diplomacy, as gifts or offerings, and even booty when conquering other kingdoms.

Gamelan Kyai Kanyutmesem at Puro Mangkunegaran, an example. Sumarsam (2018:86) says that the Sultan of Kartasura, Paku Buwana II, presented *Gamelan Kayutmesem* to his son-in-law, the Regent Ponorogo. However, due to conflicts and wars (1740), the gamelan was fought over and became spoils, which Mangkunegara finally had. *Gamelan Kyai Kancil Belik* in the Yogyakarta Palace also originated from the Surakarta Sunanate shortly after the Giyanti agreement, as a sign of respect and brotherhood. The addition of the name "kyai" to the gamelan shows its high and respectable degree or position (Hananto, 2020). The name is also used by someone who has excelled in Islamic religious knowledge in Java (Lukens-Bull, 2008).

To expand the palace's influence, East Java also did not escape the control of the Mataram Palace in Central Java, which was led by Sultan Agung (Aryanto et al., 2019). Surabaya and its surroundings were successfully defeated in five years of war (1620-1625). The treasures and princesses of the Surabaya kingdom became booty brought to Central Java. Realizing the importance of Surabaya's position as a port city, Sultan Agung brought the son of the

king of Surabaya named Pangeran (prince) Pekik to Mataram. Pangeran Pekik was married off to Sultan Agung's sister, after which he was returned to Surabaya as the new king there with the title Sunan Pekik (Ras, 1987). As a result, Surabaya became a strong ally of Mataram. Furthermore, with Sunan Pekik, Sultan Agung succeeded in defeating Giri (Gresik) in 1636. Sumarsam (2018:102) notes that Gresik has a variety of gamelan that is more or less the same as Mataram. This shows that the gamelan is given as a gift and, at the same time, a sign or symbol that Gresik is in the power of Mataram.

Madura was also successfully controlled by Sultan Agung to widen the followers of the Islamic Mataram kingdom (Burdah, 2017). During the conquest, a young Madurese prince named Prasena was brought to Mataram to be adopted by Sultan Agung. As an adult, he was appointed to be the ruler of Madura with the title Cakraningrat I (De Graf & Pigeaud, 1985:215). Cakraningrat I was even married off to Putri Pajang, Sultan Agung's younger brother. Madura and Mataram's relationship was harmonious, marked by marital ties (Raffles, 1978:325), although there were frequent rebellions and wars between the two. One of the buildings of the Madura palace that have survived to this day is in Sumenep. Its status is the kadipaten (Duchy); in 1296, it was under the Singosari kingdom; in 1559, it was under the Demak kingdom's power. The Mataram Sultanate fully controlled it in 1624 under Sultan Agung (Husson, 1997). The palace building itself was made gradually, and its peak was in 1791 on the land belonging to the Somala Addition, the ruler of Sumenep at that time. Building placement structure is identical to that of the Mataram palaces in Surakarta and Yogyakarta, although in a smaller scope (Murwandani, 2007).

Due to history narrating Madura and Mataram's close relationship, many similar artistic events were encountered, including the use of gamelan in important royal events. Munardi (1983:3) states that several gamelan instruments in the Sumenep palace are the result of gifts or offerings from the Sultan of Java to maintain the Mataram Palace's legitimacy. Furthermore, Bouvier (2002:61) explains that the relationship between the Sumenep Palace and the Islamic Mataram Palace (Kasultanan Surakarta) is very likely to encourage the entry of types of arts such as gamelan. However, the ancient gamelan explanation in the Sumenep Palace is rarely discussed, covered with various political issues, such as war and rebellion. As a result, no reference mentions the names of the gamelan in the Sumenep Palace. When researchers came to the Sumenep Palace to see the gamelan used as a witness to the harmonious relationship between Madura and Java, it turned out that the gamelan had long since disappeared or was not there. This research later became investigative work, attempting to trace where the gamelan was located.

Methods

This research employed an ethnographic approach combined with investigative methods to trace and analyze the existence of the long-lost heirloom gamelan of the Sumenep Palace. The ethnographic approach facilitated comprehensive documentation of field phenomena, including cultural aspects, individual behaviors, and the historical context surrounding the subject of study (Sharma & Sarkar, 2019). This approach allowed the present study to construct a holistic understanding of the gamelan's journey by connecting disparate events, from the reasons for its disappearance to its current condition, echoing Denzin's (2020) principles of interpretive comprehensiveness. Our application of this method followed a structured, diachronic process, inspired by Weir's (2013) framework. The process began with a comprehensive literature review, followed by the identification of key informants,

and culminated in direct field tracking. The coherence of these stages enabled us to intertwine data threads, ultimately forming a coherent narrative of the gamelan's historical traces, a goal consistent with the narrative-building emphasis in Madison's (2020) work.

To support the ethnographic approach, this research also implemented a rigorous investigative method. This method emphasized precision, patience, and systematic rigor in uncovering information that had been concealed, forgotten, or deliberately withheld from public knowledge (Lucero et al., 2018). The investigation process was strategically directed towards discovering new data through a multi-stage process of verification and triangulation. The researchers drew from a wide array of sources [including oral histories, private collections, and scattered archival fragments] an approach that aligns with Proske & van Gelder's (2009) advocacy for source diversity in historical investigation. This involved cross-referencing anecdotal accounts from elderly community members with brief mentions in colonial-era documents and the physical evidence presented by the gamelan instruments themselves. The investigative trail was often non-linear, requiring the researchers to follow leads that moved between the past and present, connecting the object's biography to the social histories of its various owners and custodians over time.

The researchers were fully aware of the profound sensitivity of the information involved, which potentially caused concern or pressure for informants and related parties, especially given the potential implications regarding ownership and cultural patrimony (Wiesand, 2016). Therefore, the approach to informants and the local community, particularly during the interview process, was conducted with utmost care and cultural respect. Relationships were built gradually through repeated, informal engagements to foster genuine trust and ensure the data collection process proceeded ethically and without causing negative impacts or social discord (Mathers et al., 2000). This often meant prioritizing the comfort and agency of the informant over the immediate acquisition of data, allowing them to control the pace and depth of disclosure. Furthermore, informed consent was an ongoing process rather than a single event, continuously reaffirmed as the nature of the inquiry evolved and deeper, more sensitive layers of the gamelans' histories began to surface.

In-depth field observation served as a key component of this investigation, employed specifically to gather data on aspects that interviews alone could not reveal, such as the physical condition of the gamelan and its storage context. Following Baker's (2006) model of immersive fieldwork, observational activities extended beyond the Sumenep Palace and its museum to other suspected locations, including private collections. All data from interviews, observations, and document tracing were then analyzed qualitatively. The goal of this analysis was to reconstruct the historical narrative of the gamelan's journey and understand its shifting value and meaning, an endeavor that resonates with the ethnomusicological and cultural biography approaches seen in the work of scholars like Sumarsam (1995) and Sugiyarto et al., (2020).

Results and Discussion

Investigation: Tracing the whereabouts of the Sumenep Palace Gamelan

Tracing the heirloom gamelan in the Sumenep Palace is not an easy matter because there is no archaeological evidence in the archaeological sites in Madura, even though during the Majapahit era, temples were built in the Talang and Jamburingin (Sumenep) areas. Since Kertanegara (1268–1292) took office, the lines of political communication between Java and

Songenneb/Sumenep have become increasingly clear. What was later informed that the gamelan culture in Madura was inseparable from the gamelan culture, especially during the Majapahit and Mataram periods. Such relations are written in the Nagarakertagama book (Rifai, 1993:14-20).

Important information can be used as a milestone in the historical traces of political and cultural relations (gamelan) between Java and Madura when there was a drama of the aristocratic marriage procession of the Surakarta palace with the daughter of the Madura Palace. Pigeaud (1938) rated this as the most spectacular wedding procession until the XX century. The Babad Madura describes the importance of the gamelan for the inclusion of a convoy of soldiers from the Surakarta Palace to pick up the prospective empress from Madura. Gamelan here is more intended as a piece of tribute music to something paraded and serves as entertainment in the middle of a long journey (Sastronaryatmo, 1981).

The refinement of the musical character of the gamelan music in Sumenep that has developed to this day seems to be evidence of the historical journey that explains the relationship of intense political and cultural communication with Mataram in the past (Hidayatullah, 2017:129). Almost all bronze gamelan circulating in Madura originated from Java, especially from Central Java. Based on data from Dutch researchers (Buys, 1926), the form of the gamelan in Madura (especially the palace) is not much different from the gamelan in Mataram (Surakarta). The difference is limited to the *rancangan* –container- (shape and carving on the wood for hanging the gong). Furthermore, J. S. Brandts Buys (1928) once informed the heirloom gamelan called *Kyai Retna Dumilah* but in the Bangkalan area (West Madura).



Figure 1. *Kyai Retna Dumilah Gamelan* in Bangkalan Regency. Photo taken from Brandts Buys 1928 documentation.

Some views, such as the admission of Darus, gamelan players and cultural observers (personal communication, June 20, 2021) and Slamet Riyadi, observers and players of Sumenep gamelan (personal communication, June 20, 2021), state that the gamelan in the Sumenep Palace has more or fewer similarities to gamelan in Bangkalan and other Madura areas, as

long as it is still is in the musical area of the Mataram Palace. Generally in *slendro* harmony with instruments consisting of; one *gong* and one *kempul*, *kendang*, *bonang*, *gambang*, *gender*, *demung*, *saron*, *saron penerus*, *kenong*, *penembung*, *rebab*, and *slenthem*. *Kyai Retna Dumilah* is currently unknown. The researchers tried to trace it by tracing various sources and interviewing several sources that were considered competent. Still, until this initial report was written, the *Kyai Retna Dumilah* had not been found. The gamelan has most likely changed hands repeatedly by being traded from one person to another, making traces of the gamelan even more difficult to detect.

Meanwhile, several ancient gamelans from the palace in Sumenep, especially *Se Reong*, are also difficult to trace due to various problems that occur within the palace walls. Since the *swapraja* movement occurred or the status of nobility and the kingdom was abolished, the palace no longer had the capital to meet life necessities, including daily ritual and cultural activities. Rifai (2007:36) explains that the Dutch abolished the aristocratic status of the indigenous Madurese rulers, and the Dutch took back control of their government, at first Pamekasan (1858), then Sumenep (1883), and Bangkalan (1885). The rest, the native rulers, were made regents who were paid and supervised very closely.

Gamelan is considered antiques that can bring financial benefits. One by one, the existing gamelan instruments were bought and sold to collectors of rare goods. According to Darus, not only gamelan, ceramics, lamps, and palace floors are also items that are being hunted at high prices. Almost all informants are unable to explain in detail the scope of the history and life of the gamelan within the palace walls, so questions such as: do the *pengrawit* within the palace wall bear the title of nobility like in the Mataram palace? What procession is played for the gamelan? How is the gamelan viewed or placed in the cultural-ritual structure of the palace? This question, until this initial research was completed, has not been clearly answered.

In mid-June, 2022, researchers came to the Sumenep Culture and Tourism Office, greeted by Sukaryo (Head of the Sumenep Culture Section), who then met key resource persons, Achmad Darus and Rifai. In chats and discussions, an initial conclusion was drawn that the heirloom gamelan in the palace at this time did not exist. However, several instruments can be seen and observed. These gamelan instruments are part of the procurement carried out by the relevant Dinas in recent years. The researchers was then directed to the Sumenep Palace Museum, which is located next to the palace. In a room at the back of the museum, several gamelan instruments are dusty, unkempt, and no longer intact on the right and left sides.

Based on figure 2 below, one of the instruments that can still be seen as a whole is a *bonang* with a *slendro* barrel, together with a *rancangan* (a place to put or hang gamelan metal plates), *demung*, *saron* and *slenthem*, *kenong*, and *gender*. When the researchers asked where the invisible gamelan metal plates were, the source said that the plates had been stolen one by one. In other words, the previous procurement of gamelans was also likely lost, stolen, or traded. The researchers also did not get clear information about the perpetrator, how the theft could be carried out, and any "inside" or "outside" parties? All these questions are sensitive and full of presumptions.



Figure 2. The new gamelan in the palace pavilion, which was later moved to the museum, many of which are missing, and the condition is getting worse.

According to Darus and Bambang (the head of the community service for RRI Nusantara II Sumenep), from the 1970s to the early 2000s, the Sumenep Palace had held a routine event every nine in the morning on Sundays, namely *klenengan* or musical performances. Gamelan groups around Sumenep are regularly invited and take turns being invited to perform. The presence of a musical group is no longer for important ritual ceremonies, as is the case in the Mataram or Yogyakarta Palace, but as part of a treat for guests visiting the palace, both state guests and tourists.



Figure 3. Gamelan performance at the Sumenep Palace Pavilion. Generally, gamelan devices like this are private property and are even better maintained.

At that time, Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI [radio of the Republic of Indonesia]) Nusantara II Sumenep took up intense recording and broadcasting live gamelan concerts at the palace. This is intended so that the work of gamelan music (musical composition, *klenengan*) is not limited to being enjoyed and heard in the palace area but spread throughout the archipelago. Information that RRI Sumenep took an important part in broadcasting gamelan music at the Sumenep Palace, then brought researchers to visit the institution the following week. Upon arrival at RRI Sumenep, the researchers was greeted by the Head of the Broadcasting Section, Jhoni Akbar (61 years). The researchers was introduced to Sunarto (64 years), a broadcaster in the *klenengan* program entitled *Manasuka Gending Madura*. The conversation was continued with a more specific theme, related to the live broadcast of *klenengan* performances at the palace.

Jhoni explained that RRI Sumenep felt that he had an important responsibility to maintain and preserve traditional culture, including gamelan music in the palace. Therefore, the recording of gamelan music is carried out by bringing broadcast equipment to the venue. The public's appreciation is quite good, and these broadcast programs are often the part that is being waited for. This was evident when cultural broadcasts (gamelan music) were performed, and the editorial staff received several calls and letters. To Jhoni Akbar, the researchers specifically asked about data in the form of photos or documents stored in RRI Sumenep related to the *klenengan* broadcast at the palace. Unfortunately, most of the data referred to have been damaged or lost due to the RRI Sumenep building's burning in 1989. These data were not yet digitized at that time, so that the photos, cassettes, tapes, and LPs were burnt. The cassette material that was saved from the fire was then digitized into mp3 and wave audio files. The researchers was granted access to digitized audio archives from RRI Sumenep, comprising a collection of 390 recordings of musical repertoire (*gending*) from well-known *klenengan* groups in Sumenep. An analysis of the archive's contents revealed several classical or old gamelan music works, such as *Tallang*, *Puspo*, *Angling*, and *Rarari*.

Unfortunately, researchers have no longer found old *Giroan Gending* or large repertoire *gending* types. The ancient *giroan gending* referred to as *Gending Nangnong*, *Lamongan*, *Menjangan Pelar*, *Pan-sampanan*, *Andimaya*, *Gerisik* (Gresik [?]), or *Arjuna Mangsah*. Great repertoire such as *Sekar Ganggong* and *Ram-eram*. Researchers also had the opportunity to be invited to see the gamelan collection of RRI Sumenep behind the main building of the former office. Almost the same as in the Sumenep Palace Museum, the gamelan collection of RRI is also not well maintained. The gamelan is kept in two narrow, dusty rooms with conditions piled on top of each other, a sign that gamelan is rarely used.

Figure 5 shows that the gamelan is relatively new, which completely imitates Java, with two tunings: *pelog* and *slendro*. Including *rancangan* and carving on the *gayor* (wood, hanger for gong instruments). The number of *kempul* instruments (rows of hanging gongs) is also large, and one-note consists of one *kempul*. Meanwhile, the old gamelan in Madura only consisted of one *kempul* and one large gong. RRI Sumenep also keeps other older gamelan instruments, only with *slendro* tunes, which have been owned since the 70s. The gamelan is colored yellow, with very simple ornamentation. Even at the end of the *balungan* instrument design (*demung* and *saron*), a zinc layer is used as a cover or connector for the resonator. This explains that the old gamelan owned by RRI Sumenep is a representation of gamelan from grassroots culture.



Figure 4. Gamelan collection of RRI Sumenep, not well maintained.



Figure 5. Rancangan of the saron instrument which is coated with zinc, while the metal of the music (blades) is made of iron.

At the time when the researchers was allowed to see the complete collection of the RRI Sumenep gamelan in Figure 6 the *slendro* barrel consists of five blades (for *balungan*) and ten *pencu* (for *bonang*), the tones start from 1 (*ji*), 2 (*ro*), 3 (*lu*), 5 (*ma*), 6 (*nem*). There is an indication that the gamelan is old with five notes because the newest gamelan usually consists of six notes with one addition of the small 1 (*ji*) note. In Madurese gamelan, especially Sumenep, ambitus tends to be lower than gamelan in Java, although the range of vocal tones is much higher or shrill. This can be seen from *Gending Miskalan* or *Gending Yang-*

layang (West Madura) or *Jula-juli* (Surabaya). In Sumenep, the tone gong is 6 (*nem*) and 2 (*ro*), while in Java, the tone gong is 5 (*ma*) and 1 (*ji*) are more common. For more details, see the following illustration.

<i>Jula-juli Surabayan</i>	<i>Miskalan Sumenep</i>
. 6 . 5 . 6 . 2 . 6 . 5 . 2 . ①	. 1̇ . 6 . 1̇ . 3 . 1̇ . 6 . 3 . ②
. 2 . 1 . 2 . 6 . 2 . 1 . 6 . ⑤	. 3 . 2 . 3 . 1̇ . 3 . 2 . 1̇ . ⑥

Figure 6. Differences in the tones of the gamelan Sumenep and Surabaya in the same musical sentence.

Gamelan produced outside the palace walls, on average, has simplicity in its physical form. For example, for example, not using excessive carving and paint accents. In fact, the gamelan is often painted one color only, as in the gamelan collection of RRI Sumenep *laras slendro* above. The metal plates are also not made of bronze and brass, and local people prefer iron as the main material. Iron was chosen because it was considered cheaper and affordable by the public. Besides, because it is made of iron, the resulting sound quality tends to be specific, resonates short, feels noisier, and "shrill."



Figure 7. Bonang instrument made of slab-iron material.

Jhoni Akbar said that the bronze gamelan was presented at RRI because it was considered better than the iron gamelan, more durable, and more classy like in the previous Sumenep Palace. Meanwhile, he himself admitted that if there were a discordant tone (false) of the bronze gamelan, it would be quite difficult to find a gamelan tuner in the Sumenep area.

An ability that most people in Sumenep don't have. Because they are better able to repair gamelan than iron, it is possible if the Sumenep Palace, to preserve the gamelan a long time ago (because the gamelan is made of bronze), brought in a gamelan tuner from "Java" when there was a breakdown in tone (discord).

The Encounter With Mega Remeng's Heirloom Gamelan

After meeting with Slamet Riyadi (a local observer and performer of the *Dungdung* music, Sumenep), researchers received information about a rare gamelan's existence. Then the researchers was introduced to Edi Setiawan, a flamboyant cultural observer of Chinese descent. From Edi, researchers got information about Gamelan *Se Reong*'s whereabouts, one of the palace heirloom gamelan that has been transferred to the hands of a new owner, thought to be of Chinese descent. The possession of gamelan or historical objects in the hands of people of Chinese descent is not new. It is even suspected that many have happened since ancient times when aristocrats fell into poverty. Chinese people became buyers of gamelan at low prices for collection or resale.

After going through a long and winding process, the investigative path finally met the researchers with Indra Suhartono, a Chinese descendant, an old gamelan owner in Karang Dhuwak village, Kota District, Sumenep Regency. According to growing information, he owns the *Se Reong* gamelan. Researchers have to lobby long enough to be allowed to see the gamelan. Finally, Indra explained that the gamelan in his collection was not *Se Roeng*, but *Kyai Mega Remeng*. Indra said that *Mega Remeng* was actually older than *Se Reong*. Indra owns the gamelan because he inherited it from his family. There are five generations of families who have cared for the *Mega Remeng* gamelan, and the last one now is him. If each family has an age range of 50 years, then the *Mega Remeng* gamelan belongs to Indra's family for more than 200 years.



Figure 8. Indra Suhartono, owner of Gamelan Mega Remeng.

Researchers are allowed to see a collection of rare gamelan belonging to the heir, Indra Suhartono, albeit on a limited basis. Gamelan *Mega Remeng* is kept in the dark and stuffy room. The positions of the gamelan are stacked against one another. It looks dusty and rarely cleaned. In some corners, incense and flowers appear as offerings, supposedly reserved for heirlooms. The gamelan has a *slendro* tone. Like the old gamelan in general, in *balungan*, there are only five blades, and *bonang* in one *rancangan* consists of 10 plates. *Mega Remeng* is made of the best quality bronze, even according to the owner's admission, there is a mixture of gold in it. *Rancangan* is dark brown in color with a relatively large shape compared to gamelan in general. According to Indra, the design's actual color is red, but his grandfather repainted it with dark brown, which is said to add to the sacred aura of the gamelan. The red color in the *Mega Remeng* gamelan is actually synonymous with the conspicuous favorite color style of the Madurese (Hartatik et al., 2010). Indra has documentation in photos when the gamelan is colored (painted) red and played by musicians during a rehearsal for performance.



Figure 9. *Rancangan* of Gamelan *Mega Remeng* when colored red.

In figure 10, not all *Mega Remeng* instruments are used, such as *kempul*, *kenong*, and *penembung*. Most likely, the use of some gamelan instruments is only used for limited concerts; in Javanese, it is called *gadhon* (Fitrianto, 2019).. In its complete formation, there is an instrument called *penembung* (smaller than *kenong*, but bigger than *bonang*), an instrument that is currently rarely found in gamelan sets. Only the old gamelans had such a *penembung* instrument. There is also the *kecrek dalang*, a metal disc piled up and then beaten with a bat, producing a *crek-crek* sound. The shape of the *kecrek* also indicates its position as an ancient gamelan, considering that the *kecrek* or *kecer* currently has a flat shape and is hung in the *wayang* box. However, the *kecrek* of *Mega Remeng* gamelan model has a relatively large size, and its use is stacked and placed on the floor (not hanging).



Figure 10. The penembung instrument (top) and kecrek (bottom).

Mega Remeng can be indicated as a means of cultural exchange (music) between Madura and Java. *Mega Remeng* is classified as a luxury item, with consequences for its owner's image and the place where the gamelan is played. This kind of “expensive” gamelan was played at exclusive places and events in the past, one of which was at the palace. Indra confirmed that the gamelan came from the palace and was played on certain occasions according to his father and grandfather. Indra did not want to provide more information regarding how his family got the *Mega Remeng* gamelan. Knowing that the gamelan from the Sumenep Palace was still there, the related Culture and Tourism Office attempted to buy it at a high price to return it to the palace. However, Indra Suhartono did not want it.

In figure 11 (number 3), the *bonang* instrument only consists of five-blades (*pencu*), namely the *slendro* barrel with a tone sequence of 1,2,3,5,6 (*ji, ro, lu, ma, nem*). The characteristics of the old gamelan can be seen from the limited number of blades, which can be seen from the *bonang* instrument. The *Kyai Mega Remeng* gamelan instrument's form and type are similar to the *Kyai Retna Dumilah* gamelan, the documentation from Buys 1926 above (see figure 1). In other words, both in Sumenep and in Bangkalan in general, the heirloom

gamelan has the same characteristics. The most striking difference is the musical style in performing it. In West Madura, particularly in the Bangkalan and Sampang areas, it tends to have louder and more upbeat musical accents, while in Sumenep, it is more subtle. This is possible because the level of influence of the Sumenep Palace has survived, while the palaces in Bangkalan (Sampang and Pamekasan) can no longer be found. The smooth musical character shows the intense interaction between the Sumenep Palace and the Mataram Kingdom in Surakarta (Yogyakarta?). This can be seen from the name of the gending and the style of play; for example, *Gending Gresik* (Sumenep) is almost similar to *Gending Kebo Giro* (Surakarta), *Gending Puspa* (Sumenep) is almost similar to *Gending Puspawarna* (Surakarta), *Gending Pangkor* (Sumenep) is similar to *Gending Pangkur* (Surakarta), *Gending Ular Kambang* (Sumenep) is similar to *Gending Uler Kambang* (Surakarta), and so on.



Figure 11. Gamalen Kyai Mega Remeng. Captions with photo figures (instruments); 1. Gambang, 2. Penembung, 3. Bonang Barung, 4. Demung, 5. Saron, 6. Kenong, 7. Kendang, 8. Siter.

The musical style that is quite visible is the exploration of *garap* instruments such as *siter*, *gender*, *bonang*, and *gambang* (and the *suling* –flute–). Meanwhile, for *balungan* instruments such as *demung*, *saron*, and *saron penerus*, which often reinforce accents at the tempo so that they sound loud, this does not happen in the Sumenep style. Such a symptom is almost the same as the gamelan *klenengan* (concert) in Surakarta, which performed *gedhe* (large) gending, relying more on the musicians' creativity in exploring the musical instruments. Unlike in West Madura (Bangkalan), the *balungan* instrument has more role because the repertoire demands a loud character.



Figure 12. The *garap* instruments for Kyai Mega Remeng; Gambang (above) and Gender (bottom, far right). Also visible are the offerings in dried flowers in a round container.

The *kempul* and gong instruments consist of one each. *Kempul* is usually pitched 5 or 6. The *kempul* instrument serves to emphasize the song's sentence, while the gong instrument is a sign that the *gending* has been going on for one round and so on. Gamelan work or *gending* is a musical cycle, presented repeatedly, and to know that the work has gone through one cycle and so on, the gong instrument becomes an important marker (Perlman, 1997). The drums in Sumenep music tend to be played softly, not loud like in Bangkalan and Madura in general. The *kendang* (drum) instrument seems to only give a simple accent, as in the *gending gedhe* repertoire in Surakarta.



Figure 13. Some of the drums, gong, and *kempul* instruments in *Mega Remeng* gamelan. According to Indra, the skin membrane in the *kendang* instrument has been changed several times.

This is possible because the main quality of Sumenep's *gending* can be measured by each instrument's musical achievement in giving a "wrap" to the vocals or the vocals (singing). The vocals in the Sumenep *gending* are different from the vocals in Surakarta or Javanese *gending* in general, which are called *sindhengan* (Sutton, 2001). In Java (Surakarta), the vocal *sindhengan* is a form of literary work that is sung. The meaning and meaning of the lyrics are often not clearly understood, even by the singer (Benamou, 2018). While the vocals in Sumenep's *klenengan* are, on the contrary, vocal lyrics can be understood by the owner community, usually alluding to the name of a guest or listener known by the singer, to be sung as part of the lyrics (Setiawan, 2020).

Since the main achievement is delivering the lyrical message to the listener, as far as possible other musical instruments should be sounded no louder than the singer's vocal voice. Musical instruments seem to be the "background" of the vocals. In such a context, it is often difficult to clearly know the song's sentence in the *gending* being played, seems to float, or sounds relying on indecisiveness. This musical incident occurred because the *demung* and *saron* instruments were not beaten loudly – these instruments were replaced by a *slenthem* (bass character) that echoed like *kempul*. Zaini, Madura musical teacher at Surabaya (personal communication, September 3, 2017) said that the Sumenep *gending* is an attempt to imitate the *gending* in Surakarta but is closely influenced by the local culture surrounds it, giving rise to a unique impression. On the one hand, it is seen as a replica of Surakarta's *gending*, but on the other hand, it is still strongly influenced by the existing local musical style. The result was the *gending* that grew into a musical identity known as the Sumenepan style.

Another evidence of Surakarta's influence (palace) is the name on the heirloom gamelans in Madura. In *Gamelan Kyai Retno Dumilah*, for example, the name Retno is not known in the Madurese linguistic structure but has a Javanese flavor, which means gold or diamond. Interestingly, the name *Retno Dumilah* is synonymous with the first female regent figure in the Madiun Regency who came to power in 1686 (Suharji, 2017). Kurniawan, Suyitno, and Rakhmawati (2020) tell that in 1590, Mataram, led by Sutawijaya, attacked the Duchy (*Kadipaten*) of Purabaya led by Retno Dumilah. In the end, the *Kadipaten Purabaya* was taken away, *Retno Dumilah* was edited by Sutawijaya and brought to the Mataram Palace. As a warning to the existence of Purabaya from Mataram, on November 16, 1590, the name *Purabaya* was changed to *Madiun*. The name has survived and is in use today. Is *Gamelan Retno Dumilah* a form of appreciation from the Mataram palace for the first female regent in Java? Or as proof of Sutawijaya's affection for *Retno Dumilah*, a gamelan set with the same name was necessary? Ideally, *Gamelan Kyai Retno Dumilah* is in Madiun, so how did the gamelan get to Madura? These questions will not be answered in this study and are trying to be answered in follow-up research.

While the name *Gamelan Mega Remeng* is actually synonymous with the name of the Sumenep Regency icon, namely Flying Horse, also named *Mega Remeng*, according to the legend of the Sumenep community, the horse has wings, which is the favorite pet of Joko Tole, the founder of Sumenep (Amil et al., 2019). The same name between the gamelan and the icon of Sumenep Regency explains that the *Mega Remeng gamelan* is old, which, according to Darus (personal communication, June 24, 2017), is probably the result of an offering from the Mataram Palace to Sumenep as part of its allies. Many suspects that the palace heirloom gamelans, including *Mega Remeng*, were the gamelan played during the wedding procession between Pakubuwana IV, the King of Kasunanan Mataram Surakarta, and a daughter from Madura. In fact, it is said that the marriage process took place by making a voyage from Surakarta to Madura via Bengawan Solo on a large boat called *Kyai Rajamala* (Sumardjoko, 2018). Of course, the marriage did bring the king and his troops and gifts (commonly called *mas-kawain*), usually in the form of luxury items, such as clothing, gold, and gamelan is no exception.

Another indication is that the heirloom gamelans are made of bronze of the highest quality. One proof of this is that the pitch or tone is still "clear," not false, which means that it is played carefully. Meanwhile, in Madura, especially Sumenep, there is more iron than bronze (Setiawan, 2020). Almost 75 percent of the gamelan in Sumenep - and Madura in general - are made of iron. In fact, it is not only made of iron, and the surrounding community tries to imitate the sound of the palace gamelan, which is manifested through a wooden gamelan called *Galundhang* (Hidayatullah, 2019). Zaini and Darus said that if there were a bronze gamelan with good quality, it would likely be imported from outside Java, especially Surakarta. Sumarsam (2014), Raffles (1978), and de Groot (1852) provide another alternative understanding that, in fact, Gresik, an area near Madura in the 18th century, was an excellent center for gamelan making. But it must also be understood that Gresik, better known as Giri, at that time was under the authority of the Islamic Mataram palace. In other words, the making of gamelan in Gresik has likely been civilized according to the Mataram palace's wishes, either as a palace collection or as a gift for another palace.

Conclusion

The relationship between Mataram and the Sumenep Palace as allies (although wars often marked it) led to cultural exchanges. Generally, a larger culture can influence a smaller culture. The conquest of Madura and accompanied by the traffic of aristocratic marriages between the two kingdoms resulted in a similarity in art, including the form and style of the musical-work-gamelan. *Gamelan Kyai Mega Remeng*, which the local community believes is one of the valuable relics of the Sumenep Palace, represents that, through gamelan, we can see traces of historical events built not always through war and power, but also cultural exchange, and art bridging this.

Gamelan Kyai Mega Remeng is made of bronze, a material for metal musical instruments rarely found in Madura because it relies more on iron. If these bronze gamelans were damaged (for example, false or discordant), they had to be repaired (tuning system) outside Madura, precisely in Java, and Surakarta became one of the important references. This shows that the gamelan culture from bronze is not the original music culture of Madura but was imported from Java. The bronze gamelan at the Sumenep Palace (*Mega Remeng*) indicates that the gamelans were a form of a gift from Mataram as part of a distant ally. Unfortunately, the palace heirloom gamelan can no longer be found because they are traded for the sake of supporting the court aristocrats who have experienced bankruptcy, both politically and economically. The gamelan changed hands, and researchers found traces of the heirloom's majesty through *Kyai Mega Remeng*. The gamelan is now owned by a Chinese descent person, who has kept it for five generations of the family. This incident proved that *Mega Remeng* was already old, more than 200 years.

Through *Mega Remeng*, it can be read further, the history of music culture in Madura, one of which is formed from the Mataram Palace's music culture. The gamelan is the first door to unravel the ties between the two kingdoms further. In-depth investigations to trace the existence of other gamelans are urgent to be carried out, as an effort to erase the narrative of the historical burdens developed between Madura and Mataram, which are identical to bloodshed, war, betrayal, and various other matters characterized by conflict. The presence of *Gamelan Kyai Mega Remeng* shows that the relationship between the two kingdoms was built based on love for peace and harmony, especially in the context of their musical culture.

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Can Creative Hubs Contribute Towards Creative City Development?

Case of Hin Bus Depot, Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

As cities shift their economic base towards culture and creativity, the emergence of creative hubs to catalyze local creative industries is acknowledged as a viable urban development strategy. In Malaysia, the concept is not new. In George Town, Penang, a sterling example is Hin Bus Depot which is a once-abandoned bus depot that reinvented itself to become a successful creative community hub. The ways upon which Hin contributes towards creative city development warrants documentation. Through qualitative techniques and a longitudinal timeframe, this paper unpacks Hin's role by revisiting its evolving functionalities, forms, and meanings as it thrives, and responds to changes. Findings indicate that Hin is an organically self-gentrified creative hub that managed to stimulate socio-economic growth within the hub, and also its surrounding neighborhood. The findings further implicate creative hub concepts, policy and practice as George Town aspires to be a sustainable and inclusive creative city.

Keywords: *Creative hubs, Creative Cities, Sustainable Urban Development, Cultural Development, Hin Bus Depot, Penang*

Introduction

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The concept of creative hub concept has assumed much attention in academia and urban development agenda, particularly when the development pathways of nations and cities start to shift towards the creative industries and creative economy. This is aligned with the United Nation's acknowledgement of the creative industries as catalyst for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and later declared 2021 as the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development. Globally, when cities de-industrialize and pivot their economic base shift towards culture, creativity and services-based; the role of creative hubs to propel urban creative industries is increasingly recognized, and creative hubs are even spotlighted as the 'lighthouse of the new economy' (Dovey et al., 2016).

Broadly, creative hubs are physical, virtual or hybrid spaces/places that appeal to creatives from the cultural, creative and technology sectors to congregate for networking purposes, collaborations, creative social entrepreneurship and community partnership (British Council, n.d.). However, the form, structure, operations, people and vision/mission that motivate a creative hub varies considerably from past industrial hubs. The philosophy and configuration of creative hubs are disrupted and subsequently refashioned in response to globalization, ICT advancements & digitalization revolution (Virani, 2015), and the on-going Covid-19 endemic. The fanfare of creative hub research is transcending borders when other contexts and geographies are recognizing the need to examine this nascent concept, such as urban hubs in Hanoi and Czech (Labbe, Zuberec & Turner, 2022; Chaloupková & Kunch, 2022). Although British Council (Malaysia) has attempted to introduce this concept in the cultural and creative sector, but there is a dearth of systematic research in the Malaysian academic sphere. Hence, this study is novel and attempts to fill this research gap by contributing to the body of literature relating to creative hubs, specifically its nexus with urban development.

On the Malaysian front, creative hubs are fast making a marked presence, especially in the UNESCO World Heritage site of George Town, Penang. In 2014, one pioneer creative hub that emerged incidentally and organically is the Hin Bus Depot, that was casually planned for an artist, Ernest Zachaveric, and organized by the local artist community to host Ernest's first solo exhibition in George Town. The original intent to search for an arts space has since evolved and morphed into bigger artistic aspirations where the hub has grown in size, functionality, values and visions, amid confronting the shocks and adversities of Covid-19 and demands of digitalization. After almost a decade since inception, Hin Depot today is unequivocally the de facto creative community hub that has etched a permanent mark on George Town's creative roadmap and cultural radar. Against this background, this paper aims to illustrate and reconceptualize Hin Depot as a creative hub based on a chronological timeline approach (i.e. then, now and future), by dissecting and revisiting the shifting functionalities, roles, and meanings of the hub as it develops, survives and responds to change. Though no one single creative hub can be similar, the lessons from Hin Depot can nonetheless serve as a comparative case study for other creative hubs within Malaysian cities or further afield.

This paper consists of five sections. The introduction explains the study's motivation while section two reviews key concepts on creative hubs and provides an overview of Hin Depot to set the background. Section three outlines the study's methodology which adopted a longitudinal approach. Findings are discussed in sections four and five. Section six concludes the paper with recommendations and implications for concept, policy and practice.

Conceptual Framework & Research Background

To fulfil the objective of establishing a case study for reference of other creative hubs in Malaysia, this section provides a chronological account of Hin Bus Depot's origins and development, after briefly defining the concept of a creative hub in the next section.

Creative Hub – Concepts & Definitions

The creative hub concept has gathered much attention alongside the fanfare surrounding the importance of the creative industries/creative economy and sharing economy (Pratt, Virani & Gill, 2019). As a phenomenon born out of yet another new (creative) economic order, the concept is gaining traction particularly in post-industrial economies and has gradually reached Global South nations like Malaysia. Understood as physical, virtual or hybrid spaces/places that attract creatives to congregate for collaboration and networking (British Council, n.d.), creative hubs are also known as 'third spaces' where workers share working spaces, information, technology, while they also socialize and establish social ties and professional acquaintanceship given the close spatial proximity in co-working spaces (Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019).

As elucidated by the London Development Agency, creative hubs are defined as "...places that provide a space for work, participation and consumption. Within its neighborhood, the hub may occupy one space, but its support activities will range across a variety of local institutions and networks. Creative hubs will form a network that will drive the growth of creative industries at the local and regional level, providing more jobs, more education and more opportunities..." (2003: 34-35). Arguably, though the aforementioned definition is generic, but creative hubs are diverse to the extent of being distinctive as there can never be two identical hubs since the motivations to establish each hub relies on the stakeholders' vision and purposes (Duchesneau & Déziel, 2019). The forms and structures of creative hubs are so diverse that they can portray as retail platforms, open access print studios, networks, maker spaces and fab labs (The Making Rooms hub; Fab lab Blackburn), incubators, co-working spaces (Duke Studios and Sheaf Street, Leeds, Hackney Bridge by Make Shift), arts venues, community hubs, artist studios/labs and such (O'Hara & Naik, 2021).

While creative hubs can be soloistic individual entities, the network aspect of hubs makes it important to fathom the ecosystem by which hubs operate. For instance, Duchesneau & Déziel (2019) explain the three (3) types of general creative hub ecosystems, namely, (i) commercial-purpose hubs; (ii) social-purpose hubs; and (iii) artistic and cultural-purpose hubs. In commercial-purpose hubs, the key focus is the production of tangible products and to propel innovative projects of high-potential start-ups to the market like the case of Espace CDPQ, tech accelerators such as Capital Innovation and FounderFuel and the Execution Lab. For social-purpose hubs, they are established to address societal concerns and their foci revolve around social innovation as evidenced by hubs like HEC Montréal's Mosaic, Techno Culture Club or the Quartier de l'innovation. As for artistic and cultural-purpose hubs, they are host to an ecosystem and network of cultural practitioners, media-tors, entrepreneurs, producers/co-producers, artists-in-residence, civil society and such. Examples of such hubs include the Artscape, La Piscine, Société des arts technologies, 104factory, the Bang Centre, Zù, and Gaîté Lyrique. Artistic and cultural-purpose creative hubs are also conduits and main avenues that provide mentoring, financial assistance, infrastructure, and fostering civic participation in the arts and culture via knowledge activities (Duchesneau & Déziel, 2019).

However, scholars argued that this nascent concept, albeit fundamental towards cultural and economic policy, is insufficiently deliberated (Pratt, Virani & Gill, 2019), and have further questioned its vaguely defined and precarious role in affecting work and productivity of employees in the creative economy (Morgan & Woodriff, 2019). Concerns regarding class, gender and race in creative hubs were also examined by British scholars where creative hubs are viewed also as spaces that can either celebrate ‘diversity’ or embed ‘privilege’ hence exacerbating inequalities (Virani & Gill, 2019). Interestingly, the creative hub concept is gradually making inroads in the East and Global South cities as well. For example, Sawangchot’s study (2016) of Osaka and Bandung highlighted that creative hubs in these urban settings tend to be bottom-up with commendable grassroots initiatives and close collaborations between creatives and artists. Urban spaces are also adaptively reused and reclaimed for cultural and creative expressions.

Against the above backdrop, this paper aims to examine a homegrown and community-driven creative hub, Hin Bus Depot, that is situated in the heart of George Town, Penang. Drawing from global definitions and constructs denoted for a generic creative hub, especially in a Western setting, this paper fills a pivotal research gap by attempting to apply the conceptual framings and utility of a global concept to a local setting. Hence, this study will investigate, compare and contrast one of George Town’s most famed and successful creative hubs, Hin Bus Depot. This endeavour is timely given that the creative industries are growing in Penang and the state’s socio-economic and cultural contextual settings are different from advanced economies. The novelty of this study lies in the longitudinal data and observation of how a local creative hub like Hin Depot has developed, evolved and sustained over time – a process that is important and invaluable. The subsequent section will recount the origins of Hin Bus Depot and then depict how the hub was instrumental towards the positive gentrification of a blighted neighborhood.

Birth of Hin Bus Depot

According to Hin Bus Depot’s official website (<https://hinbusdepot.com/about.html>), its social media platforms and published references (Chang, 2017, 2021; Khoo & Chang, 2021), the following sections will illustrate Hin Depot’s origin and its growing content offerings along with transformations to Hin, both interiorly and exteriorly.

Hin Depot initially opened its door as a bus depot owned by the Hin Company Limited, a licensed bus operator that served the Penang community until 1999. The ramshackle site was abandoned for many years before it was taken over by its current owner (a local company owned by three families) in 2010, who initially used the site for storage purposes following some minor repairs. Until the end of 2013, upon artist Ernest Zacharevic’s request, the unattended and dilapidated depot was then adaptively reused as an unusual exhibition space for Ernest’s solo exhibition, entitled “Art Is Rubbish Is Art” after some basic touch-up and repairs. Launched in January 2014, the exhibition showcased artworks made from recycled materials. The exhibition was well accepted, and had drawn interest and attention among the local creatives as well as the local and international art audiences and media. This eventually inspired a few local artists to commit to run the site as an independent artist-run space. Not long later, with intention to make arts and culture publicly accessible, Hin Depot has evolved into a community placemaking project initiated by a small passionate team of creative collectives that endeavours to sustain the depot as an accessible and affordable space for community engagement through arts, culture and creative activities/events (Chang, 2017).

Since its inception as a small gallery space within the property, and following the unprecedented challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, Hin Depot had to confront and endure situations that repeatedly challenged its sustainability, yet it survived and has now transformed into a vibrant creative cluster that sprawls over 60,000 square feet situated adjoining the buffer zone of the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site. Hin includes eleven units of old shophouses along Jalan Gurdwara and Jalan Kampung Jawa Lama. Over the years of transformation, with its growing creative contents, the hub currently houses a gallery space, artist studios, creative startups, food and beverage outlets, retail stalls/shops, a weekend creative pop-up market that supports small creative business entrepreneurs, and a newly added community hub (i.e. COEX@Kilang Besi).

Within a decade of transformation, Hin's management has continuously explored new possibilities and pragmatic ways to sustain the relevancy and popularity of Hin by upgrading, adjusting, expanding or renewing its curated contents, making it an accessible and sought-after hub for creative incubation, creation, innovation, showcasing, promotion, consumption, collaboration, sharing and exchanges to both locals and visitors in Penang. Following Duchesneau & Déziel's (2019) classification, Hin covers all three types of creative hub ecosystems. For instance, in 2014, Hin was incepted for artistic and cultural-purposes (i.e. contemporary art exhibitions, street art/murals creations, art engagement activities, performances & cultural events), and extended to cover the commercial-purpose since 2015 - 2017 (i.e. food & beverage outlets, pop-up creative market, creative entrepreneurs' startups), and recently extended to address societal issues through community experimental initiatives, civic awareness sharing and social discourses (2022-2023). The cross-sectoral extended contents have significantly enhanced its relevancy and utility to different cohorts of audiences who are engaged with Hin for varied reasons, thus affirming Hin's role as an inclusive space within the urban setting.

Besides that, the aspect of "camaraderie" among Hin's management, its space/outlet tenants/operators, and its permanent/non-permanent content co-creators (e.g. events curators, organisers & etc) is discovered in this hub and can be perceived as a sustaining factor, according to Chang's case study (2017). Although the management insists on preserving the premise by place-making it into a functional and relevant hub in meeting the contemporary needs of the community through creative initiatives and activities, Hin's tenants/operators and acquaintances, who have synched vision, are actively co-creating and co-managing various engaging contents that inspired different groups of audiences/visitors. The sustaining factor of camaraderie is significantly observed from the repeated or long-term collaborations between and within the same or extended groups of tenants/operators/acquaintances through recurring events/festivals/initiatives held at Hin, such as Sunday Pop-Up Markets (operating since 2015) and REKA (Creative Market) (annual event since 2017). Figure 1 shows the location and site plan of Hin Depot and the new wing (COEX) in George Town, while the table in figure 2 chronicles the chronological development of creative contents within Hin's premises from 2013 till 2023.



Figure 1. Location and site plan of Hin Bus Depot & COEX at George Town, Penang (Source: COEX, 2022).

YEAR	2013 - 2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 - 2023
Start-up Creative Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Art Exhibitions• F&B outlets• Clothing• Handmade accessories• Sunday Pop-up creative market• Arts & cultural workshops• Public forum/talks• Outdoor installation art & Murals• Picnic/gathering• Performances• Music• Film screening					
Add-on Contents		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bookshop• Crafts• More F&B outlets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Photography studio• Artist studio• More Crafts & Artisan Workshops• More F&B outlets• More Performances	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More F&B outlet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Workshops & Events Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• *COEX@ Kilang Besi Community Center (consist of Architect Firm; F&B outlets; Bookshop; Event & Exhibition Space; Library)

Figure 2. Table of the growing creative contents of Hin Bus Depot since 2013 – 2023. Source: Created by authors, 2023.

Hin's physical expansion is further enhanced with the inception of COEX@Kilang Besi in 2022. Functioning as a new creative community space at the refurbished metal factory within Hin, COEX@Kilang Besi frequently creates co-platforms for cross-collaborations among creatives in diverse sectors. It started with an architecture firm that relocated from suburb Gelugor, Penang, and COEX instantly took off with new tenants and curated contents. The founder of COEX refers the extended hub as a community experiment. The founding team strives to promote community engagement through active cross-collaborative experimental initiatives. Since its launch in September 2022, COEX continuously experiments the formula of engaging communities by curating diverse events, ranging from art exhibitions, music festivals, talks, book launches, live performances and a series of wellness & lifestyle programs. The addition of COEX complements Hin's existing operations by bringing in working staff from the architecture firm, who will patronize the F&B outlets during working hours on weekdays when Hin usually remains quiet. Such economic spill-over effect is much welcomed. Likewise, Hin's weekend visitors bring footfall to COEX's curated events (Teoh, 2023). The presence of COEX has diversified Hin's creative and cultural offerings, covering a wider range of fields, forms, mediums, and languages. This has effectively expanded its impact, reaching different groups of talents and audiences from diverse backgrounds and age cohorts. Besides providing the community with exposure to a rich diversity of content, COEX and Hin have collectively extended platforms and opportunities, fostering job creation, business development, networking, collaborations, and economic spin-offs both on and off-site. COEX's role will be further discussed in the following sections.

Hin Bus Depot and Gentrification

Originally, the term "gentrification" was understood as changes in the social structure and increase in the housing market (Glass, 1964). It was later interpreted as an urban development strategy with reinvestment of capital into declining or post-industrialized neighborhoods to improve the residential infrastructure, which consequently attracts the immigration of new higher-income residents, which in turn causes displacement of existing lower-income working-class urbanites (Smith, 2002; Atkinson & Wulff, 2009). It also leads to urban transformations following the shift from the industrial economy to the post-industrial knowledge, services-based or the creative and cultural economy (Ley, 1996; Smith, 2002; Kim, 2016). Intensified inter-urban competition has prompted local governments to regenerate cities through festivals, exhibitions, cultural events (Kim, 2016; Chen, Piterou, Khoo & Chan, 2018a). Kim (2016) further highlighted the increasing incidence of urban homogenization in many Asian cities as a result of state-led gentrification. In response to the adverse effects of gentrification, Chan et al. (2016) raised the concept of 'self-gentrification' as a bottom-up process instead of a state-led gentrification process, where long-term residents (i.e. returning migrants and local entrepreneurs) have proactively empowered themselves as the 'gentry' or 'self-gentrifier,' where they benefit from the process, instead of being displaced from the regenerating city.

Undoubtedly, Hin's development aligns with the concept of 'self-gentrification' as elucidated above. The different groups of grassroots creative and cultural practitioners, who cluster to interact and organically support the revitalization of the premise as well as sustain Hin's identity and its content delivery bears testimony to self-gentrification. Hin's expanding creative contents depend heavily on bottom-up commitments and the proactive participation

and partnerships amongst the active community within an inclusive stakeholder network, comprising individuals and collectives who are directly or indirectly involved.

At Hin Depot, tenants, market operators, curators, event organizers, consumers, visitors, content creators, suppliers, and local community collectively generate long-term economic, social and environmental values through civic boosterism and post-industrial urban entrepreneurialism (Khoo & Chang, 2021). The presence of Hin Depot in the heart of George Town as a creative community hub has enabled local communities to jointly reclaim their space and conserve their heritage while concurrently establishing their own culture to improve their economic and social standings. These happened under mindful management, socially conscious proprietorship (who deliberately delayed the market rent adjustment in order to minimize the displacement impact within Hin's premise) and committed collaborations across multidisciplinary creative practitioners (Chen et al., 2018a).

Hin Depot's close proximity to the George Town city centre, especially its strategic location near to the buffer zone of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has effectively increased its city's visitors and cultural footprint. This facilitates Hin Depot's self-gentrification process. As a vibrant hub that attracts both local and international visitors, Hin Depot is increasingly assuming a pivotal role in supporting Penang's tourism industry. The effects of economic spin-off, as part of the value chain of the creative economy, have inevitably gentrified and regenerated Hin Depot's neighborhoods, which used to be a blighted area that was deemed unsafe and minimally visited by locals or tourists alike. Since UNESCO inscription in 2008 and later with Hin Depot's resuscitation and reintegration into the local socio-economic scene, new developments and property investments are seen in its vicinity. Hotels, hip and arty cafes, trendy restaurants, creative concept stores and such are visible in the adjoining areas.

Methodology

In examining and chronicling a creative hub's changes, the research enquiry calls for a longitudinal data collection and analysis approach that captures data and analyses findings from different timeframes, so that the socio-economic and cultural transformations in an urban setting can be systematically documented and analyzed. To achieve this, different datasets were used and they cut across several research projects to illustrate the developments and changes at Hin Depot so that our research aim could be achieved. The most recent dataset was from qualitative techniques (i.e. interviews, site observations) at Hin Bus Depot from February – March 2022, and again in November 2022. Additionally, the methodological novelty of this study resides in the use of heuristic lens to examine the transformations of Hin Depot over the years. Heuristic lenses enable a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences obtainable through interviews, focus group discussions and observations, as aptly illustrated in this study.

The qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with the hub manager/hub owner, which took place twice. Both interviews were conducted face-to-face with the hub manager at Hin Depot. The first interview was longer and took about one (1) hour while the second interview was about 30 minutes. In keeping with qualitative tradition, the hub manager was purposely sampled given that she would have all the pertinent knowledge required

for this study. The first interview was useful to flesh out key aspects and variables that either converged/diverged from existing literature, and the follow-up second interview further verified data gaps and discrepancies. The interview protocol consists of nine (9) sub-sections as shown here: (A) Origin & History; (B) Programmes; (C) Processes; (D) People; (E) Place; (F) Values; (G) Impact; and (H) The Way Forward. Additionally, 30 retailers from Hin Depot's Sunday pop-up market were also briefly interviewed in March 2022 based on similar themes. The names of these 30 retailers were provided by the hub manager where they represented a good mix of retailers and micro-entrepreneurs who operated during the pop-up market. Their names were selected based on random sampling method. For site observations, both researchers frequented Hin Depot regularly, especially during their Sunday pop-up market, and the changes in Hin's activities, programs, exhibition contents and retailer presence were duly documented.

NVivo was used to thematically analyze the qualitative interviews for both semantic and latent meanings. Constructs/nodes based on the nine (9) sub-sections of the interview protocol were coded while new emerging themes were categorized accordingly. Simultaneously, past data gathered in previous projects in 2016, 2018, 2019 and previous publications by both authors (Khoo & Chang, 2021; Chan, Chen, Piterou, Khoo, Lean, Hashim & Lane, 2021; Chen, Piterou, Khoo & Chan, 2018a, 2018b) were referred as they were key secondary resources to illustrate the backdrop of Hin Depot in order to comprehend the origins of the hub as well as previous functioning, and the way Hin Depot has evolved, flourished and sustained till today. Other secondary data from journals, periodicals, blogs and website resources were also referred and collectively analyzed alongside the primary data collected for this project. The datasets (primary and secondary) were triangulated to address the research enquiry, especially to unravel the dimensions of 'now' and a 'reconceptualized future' of how a Malaysian creative hub should and would be amid changes. Triangulation entailed cross-checking data across multiple sources, diverse stakeholders and the extant literature. The interviews were validated when saturation point was reached for selected themes. In addition, secondary data from reports/website reporting/periodicals and such, were referred extensively to verify and validate primary interview accounts. Although the hub manager was interviewed several times during the course of this study, risk of response bias was mitigated when other stakeholders (i.e. retailers, new co-owner) were interviewed as well where fact checking was crossed-validated across different stakeholders of the hub.

Findings

Cultural and Creative Places/Spaces on George Town's Radar

Since the city's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, George Town has become a mecca of creative and cultural attractions. Art, cultural and creative spaces/venues/hubs have emerged and flourished around George Town World Heritage Site (GTWHS) since then. Established as the venue that hosted the famous street artist Ernest Zacharevic's solo exhibition, Hin Depot instantly became a favorite hub for international urban art exchange between local and international street artists. In 2014, in collaboration with the Berlin-based urban art centre (i.e. Urban Nation), Hin Depot hosted the first international street art festival in Malaysia, namely Urban Xchange. The festival brought together famous international and local street artists who collaborated to produce 16 public murals at various locations within George Town downtown area. The subsequent year, Hin Depot's

management organized the second Urban Xchange. Penang's art community generally acknowledged "street art" as part of Hin Depot's DNA. Furthermore, from the start till now, Hin Depot's exhibition space has always been the hot spot for contemporary art exhibitions showcasing local and international artists. Unlike other 'white cube' fine art galleries that mostly showcase mainstream art forms and established artists' works, Hin Depot offers an alternative space for both emerging and established artists. It features all art forms and genres, including paintings, photography, interdisciplinary art, new media art, art installations or experimental art, in order to engage the audience with a different artistic experience. Apart from showcasing its in-house curated exhibitions, it also hosts other curators' art shows. To improve the accessibility and outreach of art to a broader public, especially young collectors, Hin Depot actively promotes affordable art exhibitions.

Besides its exhibition space, Hin Depot's mural garden and lawn are both ideal spaces for outdoor performance art, musical events, public art engagement activities, and such. Additionally, the deck frequently hosts artist sharing sessions, art talks, workshops, film screenings and others. During the yearly George Town Festival, Hin Depot is definitely one of the event venues selected to host featured art programs, hence, making it the hotspot art, cultural and creative place and space on George Town's radar.

Model and Good Practice of Creative Hub

Unmistakably, throughout the years, Hin Depot has etched a name for itself for being a de facto model and successful creative and cultural community hub in George Town. Unanimously, all stakeholders interviewed, whether from the private or public sectors, would regard Hin as the model and good practice creative hub that others can refer to. The private sector owners are applauded, and Hin Depot is highly regarded as a success story of rags to riches, where a derelict and abandoned bus depot was transformed into a hype and vibrant urban cultural and public space for all and sundry (see Figures 3 – 4).



Figure 3. Hin Bus Depot @ George Town, Penang. Source: Site visit, 23 Feb. 2022.



Figure 4. Exhibition Space is constantly used by artists and creatives to showcase their works. Source: Site visit, 23 Feb. 2022.

Nonetheless, in unravelling the gist of creativity regardless of genre (i.e. artistic, cultural, technological, etc.), the element of newness and novelty must feature strongly in terms of the processes involved, the software, hardware and the stock of human capital to spark new ideations. In this regard, a 'creative hub' is perceived as a 'house' or a space, place, or platform to allow creatives to cluster, network and facilitate the inceptions of new ideas. However, the physical shape and forms as well as the subjective emotions and sense of place in Hin Depot cannot be imitated and replicated across the city in a lock, stock and barrel manner. This is because a creative hub, by default, is variegated and unique like that of our DNA thumbprint (Dovey et al., 2016). Hence, there can never and should not be a scenario of having closely identical versions of a creative hub albeit Hin Depot's famed accolade of being a model creative hub. Especially so when the creative and cultural industries and economy consist of diverse sub-sectors (i.e. film, design, gaming, advertisement, etc.), thus, there should be different permutations, forms and genres of creative hubs to portray and celebrate this diversity.

Although emerging creative hubs in George Town can draw lessons by referring to Hin Depot's structure and processes to garner insights, but ultimately, a creative hub should be bold enough to live by its values of experimentation, exploration and unearthing new grounds to differentiate themselves from others. This would then ensure that each and every creative hub is unique and makes a marked presence in the urban setting, just the way Hin Depot has unfolded, but with a cautionary note of not having a physical or digital twin of itself.

Creative Hubs & the Nucleus Concept

The clustering prowess of creative hubs is also intertwined with the nucleus concept. Although the original tenets in Harris and Ullman's Multiple Nuclei Model contend that the central/core (or Central Business District) will lose its importance to the adjoining or pe-

ripheral parts, in the context of a creative hub (as core) as featured in Hin Depot's case, it is still perceived as a focal point and its monumental presence serves as an anchor for other creative sub-sectors and micro-businesses to leverage, cluster and converge. See Figures 5 – 6. In urban development parlance, the urban expansion and sprawling of cities oftentimes invite mixed reactions. But, in creative hubs as illustrated by Hin Depot, a sprawling hub actually connotes positively, suggesting a hub's magnetic pull factor and ancillary role for other nuclei (i.e. creative businesses, arts activities) to be attached and form physical mass as well as construct a nuanced form and local identity, that in turn, affirms the favorable social-economic and cultural development of a creative hub within an urban environment.



Figure 5. Hin's Weekly Pop-up Market provides space for creative and micro-entrepreneurs. Source: Site visit, 6 March. 2022.



Figure 6. Hin's Weekly Pop-up Market at the lawn. Source: Site visit, 6 March. 2022.

The myriad and variety of micro-enterprises (i.e. Sew Cuddly, How Shy, etc.), retail shops (i.e. Kazimi, Rumah Kacha aka The Glass House, Suka-Suka, Osmanthus Alley, etc.), exhibition spaces, studios, even a fine-dining restaurant ‘au Jardin’ and the weekly Hin pop-up market on Saturdays and Sundays have indeed catalyzed local economic activities and provide employment opportunities for creatives, especially young and budding ones. More distinctively is the extension and emergence of the COEX@Kilang Besi wing that houses ALM Architecture, another sub-sector in the creative and cultural industry. The new wing also houses a range of other creative and cultural curio shops, startups and storefronts. According to the founder, the COEX acronym can be permuted to have seven (7) different meanings: (i) COMMunity EXperiment; (ii) COLlaboration EXperience; (iii) COMmitted EXecution; (iv) CONTinuous EXcel; (v) COLlaborators EXploration; (vi) COLlaborators EXpec-tation; (vii) COexist EXplain, all with the aspiration to experiment, create and innovate in the space. See Figures 7 – 8. He highlighted that his space is created to:

“...be organic and to find its own DNA and growth trajectory like a bonsai plant. It is OK to fail as you need not portray to be the best every time because this is a place to experiment.” (COEX Creative Hub Founder, interview, 15 Nov. 2022).



Figure 7. COEX – the new wing at Hin Bus Depot. Source: Site visit, 15 Nov. 2022.

Obviously, the Hin Depot case bears testimony that a well-curated and organized creative hub can function as an anchor hub, and be appealing to attract other sub-sectors of the creative and cultural industry to co-locate, spur local economic development and cross-fertilise ideas among and across creatives.



Figure 8. COEX – Exterior of the new wing. Source: Site visit, 15 Nov. 2022.

Creative Hub as Catalyst for Creative Pulse, Synergy & Energy

Characterized as peoples with curiosity, openness, innovativeness, flexibility, who dare to explore new ideas, and capable to see relevance and making interesting connections across diverse disciplines towards new creations of inspiring solutions, creative individuals always act as the catalyst to attract future and more talents to agglomerate, connect, exchange or collaborate to foster synergies towards realizing each other's aspirations (Landry, 2012). Resonating with Landry's idea, Ernest Zacharevic (a Penang-based Lithuanian artist) who held his solo show at Hin Depot acted as the creative catalyst. While Ernest Zacharevic's street murals around George Town had accorded him widespread fame in the global street art scene at that period, his exhibition at Hin immediately became a magnetic attraction to both local and international art communities alike.

Through Ernest Zacharevic and the personal past experiences of the initial management team (led by Gabija Grusaite, a British author cum curator and Eeyan Chuah, a local curator), Hin formed extensive connections and networking with both local and international creatives in art, including individual artists, curators, art collectors, art project organizers, managers, art funding organizations, art agencies, art academies, institutions and also practitioners in music, film, photography, performance, designs, architecture and such. The management's adoption of informal but flexible connections, collaborations and comradeship among like-minded stakeholders instead of official engagements with formal or governmental organization has stimulated the fluidity of creative resources and innovations

within the active and inspiring hub for creative class as espoused by scholars in creative class/districts literature (Kim, 2016; Florida, 2002; Chen et al., 2018b). The Sunday Pop Up Market, initiated after informal discussions among Hin's founder and friends, exemplifies a significant scenario reflecting the ideas of the aforementioned scholars. Starting without structured strategies, the market began with a few stalls, allowing operators to participate flexibly based on individual availability. Operating with a trial-and-error mindset, artisans convened weekly, sharing a co-curated start-up marketing platform. Under this friendly and collaborative initiative, artisans and creatives supported, inspired and learned from each other's experiences and also 'errors' in creative production, marketing and branding. The interviews conducted with Hin's stakeholders in 2016 consistently highlighted the sense of informal interactions and camaraderie among Hin's start-up tenant and managing team.

"It is good to bring in lots of things here. Our business moved really slow when we were the only cafe here in 2014. The first time I see people lining up here for my coffee was in November 2015. Now, with the pop-up market on Sunday, additional F&B outlets and artist studios, it further supports our business. We do not see each other (Hin's tenants/vendors) as competitors but family members who are working together to make this place a better place for all." (Operator of the First Café in Hin, interview, Aug 19, 2016)

"The whole process is about expanding the family. The key challenges are keeping the momentum of making our members (stakeholders) and visitors engaged. We are frequently questioning our inadequacies.... Today's Hin is accessible to everyone, not merely the art circles." (Hin's Gallery Manager, interview, Aug 19, 2016)

In sustaining its identity as a dynamic creative hub, the management never ceases to upgrade Hin Depot's contents with additional inputs from creative talents, such as the idea to offer inclusive platforms of opportunities and possibilities to more creatives in diverse expertise, covering creative retailers/marketers/entrepreneurs in crafts, F&B, technology applications, organic farming, healthy & wellness products, as well as creative collectives and community groups who are experimenting initiatives for positive public engagements. All these evolving creative elements collectively synergize Hin Depot's ambience and dynamic energies that consequently inspire and support the development of the creative ecosystem within the city of George Town.

Sustainable Development Goals No. 11 – Resilient, Sustainable, Inclusive & Safe Urban Settings

Globally, creative cities tend to incorporate creative hubs as part of their urban landscape, the more pertinent question would be the ability of these hubs, singularly or collectively, to be resilient, inclusive and sustainable in the long term. In this regard, Hin Depot has stood the test of time. Since its establishment in 2014, Hin was tested on various fronts, particularly related to financial sustainability to run and sustain a creative hub. Without a predecessor to refer to, Hin braved uncharted waters and pioneered the first organic creative community hub in George Town. A commendable point to note is the grit determination of the hub's private owners to commit themselves in developing Hin Depot - an endeavour never before undertaken by the private sector on this magnitude, especially when the art and culture agenda and funding matters are oftentimes relegated to the backseat in public policy affairs.

When Covid-19 hit, Hin and its hub members were again creative and proactive to pivot and adopt digitalization as much as possible. Hin Store, a digital marketplace featuring art, merchandise, and gifts from local and international artists within Hin network, was launched during the pandemic. Timely and apt, it supports and nurtures a sustainable creative market in the new normal era. However, many of the stakeholders interviewed in 2022 still preferred the in-person mode and viewed the depot's rustic setting as a major appeal for locals and tourists alike. In due course, the droves of visitors who returned to the hub when lockdowns were lifted attest to the allure of brick & mortar hubs, especially a historic building like Hin that exudes an urban retro feel. In sustainability rhetoric, to adaptively reuse dilapidated buildings/structures like Hin Depot is a move towards the right direction where historic buildings are salvaged, reused and repurposed, and subsequently, the neighborhood revitalized and local economy regenerated. The Hin Depot model, arguably, can be key exemplar of a resilient, inclusive and sustainable creative hub, with the element of malleability being integral, given that hubs cannot be static, but reinvent themselves and morph as circumstances warrant. In this context, Hin Depot contributes significantly towards achieving SDG No. 11 and the Hin Depot success story could potentially be emulated by other Malaysian cities/hubs or further afield.

The Way Forward

To date, Hin Bus Depot prides itself as being among the 'coolest' and most successful creative hubs in George Town, Penang, or even in Malaysia. Besides being the hub known only to creatives whether for professional or social purposes, Hin Depot has also earned itself an enviable accolade as a 'must see' location featured in state and national tourism brochures when visiting George Town. This study confirmed Hin Depot's key exemplar role as a creative hub evidenced through Hin Depot's on-going and active expansionary initiatives that are shaping and charting the hub's future direction. Three (3) key phenomena were observed as discussed below.

Hub Expansion

First, the hub has grown in size, and its entrepreneur headcounts, as well as the creative and cultural contents, have also increased in leaps since its inception in 2014. This positive growth has created a vibrant cultural pulse, where Hin Depot exudes a creative and cultural vibe of sorts when being physically present there. The table in figure 2 provides an overview of Hin Depot's evolving contents and growth trajectory from 2013 to 2023. From Ernest Zacharevic's solo exhibition in 2014 where the space was initially used for visual arts, performing arts, fashion, music, some F & B, the depot further became a space and hub to house artisanal studios, workshops as well as performances in 2016. The period from 2017 to end of 2019 witnessed Hin Depot hosting many workshops and it appeared to be the 'go to place' for F & B. However, when Covid-19 hit in 2020, Hin Depot was not spared by taking a hiatus from physical activities (i.e. 2020 to end of 2021). The activities and programs that were conducted in-person at Hin Depot had to migrate and pivot to the virtual realm during then when the Malaysian government imposed several rounds of lockdowns. The hub, nonetheless, gradually 'opened up' again to physical activities when lockdowns were lifted after 2021. The pandemic tested Hin Depot's resilience but it was quick to spring to its feet again. By bouncing back better and stronger, Hin Depot started to organise more weekly pop-up markets where the pop-up market is now also organized on Saturdays instead of just Sundays. This illustrates that Hin Depot is successful as a creative hub, and operated well as an intermediary to bring together producers and consumers of arts, cultural and heritage in George Town, Penang

Hin-COEX Collaboration: Symbiotic Co-Existence of Two Creative Hubs

Second, apart from vibrant economic activities within Hin Depot itself, the contagion effect of the hub is tapped by COEX@Kilang Besi when they (COEX) saw the promise and potential of leveraging the depot's creative and cultural vibrancy. COEX currently rents their space from Hin Depot, and in turn, sub-lets to smaller tenants within its (COEX's) compound. To outsiders, COEX is viewed as an extension or even an extended wing to Hin Depot, but in actual fact they are two different entities co-existing symbiotically in the same locality. It is certainly heartening to see that COEX is anchored by another creative sub-sector, (i.e. architecture). The mastermind behind COEX is a well-known practising architect-cum-avid artist who paints during his free time. Besides housing his architectural practice at COEX, the space is astutely designed and utilized to cater for exhibitions, creative/cultural events, and such. Presently, some of COEX's sub-tenants include a pop-up bookshop, a burger joint, a souvenir shop, among others. Drawing from the Hin Depot-COEX symbiosis scenario, there is likelihood that a creative hub can grow physically and expand in size incorporating other creative sub-sectors, which in turn contributes towards the socio-economic and cultural sustainability of the hub in the long term. Such micro and meso expansions would in turn positively impact the wider macro urban development and renewal of the once-upon-a-time blighted neighborhood where Hin Depot is still located. Both Hin Depot and COEX hub owners acknowledged that their close proximity and symbiotic relationship have singularly or collectively complemented each other's visions and activities. For example, those who visited the weekend pop-up market at Hin Depot would also drop by COEX and vice-versa. As such, there is constant footfall in both hubs thus facilitating complementary, supplementary and shared success between them.

Hub Mobility

Third, a novel discovery is unravelled in this study. The socio-economic and cultural prowess and allure of a creative hub are not merely restricted to its own physical boundaries but transcends such parameters. With its current fame, Hin Depot no longer leaves its footprints in George Town only but has transcended state borders to reach Johor and other Malaysian states (see Figure 9). It is welcoming and refreshing to see how Hin Depot has expanded and extended its creative and cultural presence outside of George Town, Penang, with Facebook advertisement taglines like 'Hin on the Move' announcing Hin's presence in Parit Bunga, Ledang, Johor, on 26 & 27 August 2023. This discovery is testimony that a well-organized creative hub can grow laterally beyond their existing footprint. Such a favourable outcome can motivate other budding creative hubs to strive towards positively impacting their local creative scene and the wider cultural economy. In turn, Hin Depot also attracts creatives from other parts of Malaysia to come to the hub and showcase their works. For example, creatives and cultural practitioners from Selangor (Macy's Handcraft, Eureka), Kuala Lumpur (Amorphous, My Beerkaki, Omo Omo Sticker X Chuangyidian), Muar (Elephant Floral), Johor (San 3 Handcraft, Teduh, Te.Ti.Tu), among others, are making their presence known in Penang through Hin Depot.

The above illustrations of Hin Depot's growth status and progress are commendable and give much relevancy, utility and currency to the concept and role of a creative hub in catalyzing socio-economic and cultural development in cities. From a formerly derelict and abandoned bus depot, Hin has bounced back to life and, at the same instance, functioned as an organic stimulus to catalyze the surrounding working class and blighted neighbor-

hood around the KOMTAR-Gurdwara area. No doubt, Hin Depot can serve as a sterling example for other cities on how an organic creative hub has been successful in revitalizing its vicinity en route towards sustainable urban development. Hin's success resides in a strategic management approach emphasizing camaraderie, co-creation, and collaboration. Fostering a diverse community- and talent-centered environment, coupled with its solid international networking, has enabled adaptability in the ever-evolving creative landscape. Tolerance, inclusivity and proactive adaptation empower Hin to leverage setbacks for continuous learning and improvement.



Figure 9. 'Hin on the Move' signifying Hin's presence in other Malaysia states like Johor. Source: Hin Depot's Facebook page, September 30, 2023.

Conclusion and Implications

The growing importance of the creative city concept has inevitably spotlighted the need to nurture and develop a city's creative industries, creative economy and also the pockets of creative hubs that exist, both formally and informally, within the city milieu. Though a nascent concept that is still understudied in many geographical contexts, arguably, the absence of a formalized label 'creative hub' in development plans or strategic blueprints does not mean that a city is void of their own version of a creative hub. In reality, many cases of variegated forms that are latent, invisible, covert and disorganized, would have actually existed and possibly thrived organically in many societies like the case of Hin Depot as showcased here. The fluid and elusive manner upon which creative hubs originate, develop, thrive and survive differs considerably across geographical, temporal and socio-cultural contexts, and are shaped by the vision, mission and values that underscore a hub. The progenitor of the hub, whether private-driven, public-dictated, community-led or a strategic partnership of all three (i.e. public-private-civil society alliance), will in one way or another shape and influence the operations, future directions and sustainability of a creative hub.

In this study, there is an attempt to map the developmental trajectory of a community-driven creative hub in George Town, Penang – Hin Bus Depot. The key findings illustrated that Hin Depot is a successful creative hub fulfilling its commercial, social and cultural purposes, verifying Duchesneau & Déziel (2019) theory of what creative hubs normally endeavour to be. In agreement too with the London Development Agency's (2003) concept,

Hin Depot also serves as an intermediary and a place for creatives and micro-entrepreneurs to work, produce, consume and also network with others to form new synergistic and creative alliances, be it within the hub itself or further afield in other creative hubs in other Malaysian states. However, a stark difference from existing theories lies in the 'humanistic human resource management approach' of Hin Depot as dissected above where the owners are empathetic towards young and budding creatives, and the unwavering belief that a creative hub that is well-supported, especially by the community of creatives themselves would stand a chance of better survival and sustainability. Hin Depot is also a sterling exemplar of a 'rags to riches' creative hub in Penang showcasing how a once dilapidated and defunct depot could be astutely and adaptively reused and transformed into an inclusive space, place and hub for communal arts and cultural endeavours. The ups and downs depicted in operating and sustaining Hin Depot provide key insights for other aspiring hubs, whether in George Town or other Malaysian urban settings.

In summary, this study is instrumental towards creative hub development in Penang specifically and for Malaysia in general. For conceptual implication, the case of Hin Depot affirms that agglomeration of creative talents/occupations are just as important as conventional geographical theories of clustering of firms. The novel discovery at Hin Depot is the way a creative hub can organically develop itself through integrative and collaborative planning together with the community (of creatives), and spearheaded by private sector commitment. It reveals that survivalism and resilience of creative hubs do not only depend on public coffers for initiation and ideation, but can succeed with sufficient vision and commitment from the private and civil domains, respectively. It is thus pivotal to unravel the "DNA" of each hub, that differentiates and makes it distinctive to enhance its competitive and comparative edge. Sawangchot's case studies (2016) on cultural spaces in Osaka and Bandung reveal that some creative/cultural hubs arise from grassroots initiatives, adaptive reuse of spaces and collaborative networks of artists and creatives. Similar to Hin Bus Depot, their resilience relies more on community participation, self-organization, and cross-sector collaboration than on top-down public interventions. This broader regional perspective affirms that Hin Bus Depot's development is not an isolated case; instead, it somewhat reflects a common pattern of organic creative hub growth across Asian cities, each shaped by its local context and distinct cultural characteristics/DNA.

Policy-wise, the success story of Hin Depot should inform urban managers on ways to acknowledge, integrate, plan, and develop other creative hubs (within a creative & cultural district), which in turn can catalyze the creative industries/economy of a city, but with due considerations for urban cultural inclusion and cultural democratization for all urban citizenries. As Sasaki (2011) posits, policies targeting social inclusion must guarantee that all community members have the opportunity to participate economically, socially, and culturally. The practical implications deriving from this study will require stakeholders to take cognizance of creative hubs as urban catalysts, their spin-off activities and economic ripple effects to other upstream/downstream economic activities and the hubs adjacent vicinity. Emphasis should be given to the types and diverse needs of creative people, processes, value chains and ecosystems that deserve support in terms of capacity building, funding, infra- and infostructure provision and continuous efforts to nurture inter and intra relations with other creative hubs en route towards sustainable creative city development. Nevertheless, potential challenges that might emerge include long-term sustained support

(i.e. capacity building, research and development), bureaucratic red tape and funding availability for further growth of the creatives individually and the wider creative ecosystem. Hence, according formal recognition to creative hubs should quickly garner policy attention so that hubs and the people and processes within them can be nurtured for the overall good of the cultural and creative economy.

Given the nascency of creative hub research in Malaysia, this study is a pivotal springboard to conduct more similar and related studies in other Malaysian creative hubs in the city milieu or even in suburb or rural settings. Given that Hin Depot is largely an art and cultural hub situated right smack in the hustle and bustle of downtown George Town, future research could attempt to examine tech-laden creative hubs or eco-creative hubs, whether in urban or rural settings. As a new urban denomination, the creative hub is worthy of further research exploration as there can never be a one-size-fits-all template albeit the success story illustrated by the Hin Bus Depot. Although Hin Depot deserves to be a good case study for reference, the way upon which the creative hub concept can be implemented for Malaysian cities or further afield will differ and has to be location-specific to tailor to the local contexts and specificities of the city. This opens up platforms for future research in creative hubs as a driver towards sustainable and inclusive development of creative cities in Malaysia.

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Transnational History and ASEAN's Young Scholars

in Regional Connectivity: Perspectives from Mainland Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Past legacies profoundly shape contemporary relationships between ASEAN's countries. Unfortunately, voices of history do not always generate a healthy motivation for regional connectivity, but recall painful images of warfare and conflict between polities that developed into present-day Southeast Asian nation-states. Such histories can be seen in ongoing disputes over the South China Sea, or at a temple on the Thai-Cambodian border. Taking countries in mainland Southeast Asia as a case study, this paper explores the role history education and Southeast Asian studies play in managing past legacy and facilitating the ASEAN Community with a particular focus on the integration of regional young scholars. It argues that ASEAN's connection cannot be achieved unless a sense of sharing history and culture is built up among its citizens and the pioneering responsibility falls to a new scholarly generation who are the future key players in bridging that river of mistrust and hostility.

Keywords *Transnational History, Nationalist Historiography, Nationalism, History Education, ASEAN Community, Southeast Asian Studies*

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Introduction

This paper examines the new epistemological production of Southeast Asian studies through the emergence of a young generation of scholars coming from the region, who are standing at the crossroads of the area and global studies. Taking the historical legacy of mainland Southeast Asia as a departure point, it investigates the role teaching history plays in shaping and sharing knowledge promoting regional connection, and corresponding to the ASEAN projection of regionalism. While the heritage of the past continues to have profound implications in contemporary relationships among countries in ASEAN, those historical voices sometimes do not generate a healthy air for regional connectivity, but instead, result in unpleasant images of conflict and dispute among ethnicities and political polities in the region. Such living history is embodied in the political discourse found in on-going disputes over the sea and land across Southeast Asia, as well as in the way national history is being taught or narrated.

For the ASEAN community, managing the past heritage to facilitate a regional perspective of sharing history and culture becomes essential for any design of regionalism. The emerging academic dialogue among young local scholars certainly owns a pioneering responsibility to construct a bridge across the river of mistrust and hostility. This paper suggests that by promoting transboundary education and intercultural and cross-national networks, ASEAN's young scholarship creates a common intellectual ground for illuminating regional diversity of histories and cultures. In doing so, this paper proposes that scholars on the mainland are required to go beyond nationalist conventions of teaching and writing history with nationalistic pride. The making of the young scholarship network and integrating knowledge within the area are vital in promoting mutual understanding and producing a transnational version of regional history. The phenomenon not only promotes the rise of the local voices but also creates an atmosphere to reach beyond conventional Western approaches to understand Southeast Asia and create a new epistemology of Southeast Asia from a non-Western-centric perspective.

Southeast Asian History at the Crossroad of Area and Global Studies

Area studies have entered a new fate across the world of academia. In fact, the emerging global and international studies have profoundly reshaped the state of the field and lead to a general belief that area studies are in a crisis (Huat et al., 2019). Not only facing "the crisis of legitimacy," its struggle expands to new demands of rebuilding its structure, research methodologies, and geographical interest. In response, enormous scholarly efforts have invested to transform area studies by integrating different academic disciplines, or deploying interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transnational, and global approaches. In Southeast Asia, local scholars now take a new role to play that aims to replace Western long-held domination of the field and produce new epistemological underpinning in promoting new understanding within the region.

By the 1990s, the global geopolitical shift generated tremendous impacts on the prospect of area studies in general and Southeast Asian studies in particular, and for the first time, challenging the validity of the field as an "authentic" scientific subject and epistemological foundation. Like other area studies subjects, giving birth after World War II and as a result of the Cold War and global geopolitics, Southeast Asian studies ultimately reflected the US concern toward the region neither academic nor historical and cultural interest at first hand, but political interest. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of ideological divergence

have significantly reshaped the superpower's global strategy. This worldwide phenomenon during the last three decades has laid a new intellectual landscape for reconfiguring area studies with both challenges and opportunities. To mark the phenomenon, social scientists have developed a couple of bold themes, such as the "End of History" and "The World is Flat" to illuminate globalization as an overwhelming economic and cultural force under which the world is increasingly becoming similar rather than regional differentiation (Fukuyama, 2006; Friedman, 2007; 2012).

Consequently, there is an ongoing debate in Europe and Northern America bringing the existence of Southeast Asian Studies under the spotlight of critique. It stresses the argument that there is no need to launch or maintain research institutes and programs specifically dedicated to Vietnamese studies, Thai studies or Southeast studies in general because of their newly established role under the global studies umbrella. In addition, in terms of the theoretical framework and methodological approach, Southeast Asian studies are in a crisis because they failed to produce "a synthesis of knowledge that transcends disciplinary divides and power hierarchies between the Western and non-Western academia." (Goh Beng-Lan, 2011:1).

Is it the time for Southeast Asian studies to step back from the old academic paradigm to hold a less significant position within the institution of international and global studies? The answer is highly likely not the case. History is not yet to be "ended," or more accurately, did not finish in the scenario that was expected by the West. Political upheaval across the globe in the post-Cold War poses new challenges for reconstructing different bodies of human knowledge geographically. Following the Gulf War (1990-1991) there was a spectre of antagonism that was described by many between some Western countries and the Muslim World, and most recently, the September 11th attack and global war against terrorism (GWOT). These new forms of conflict had the effect of making clear that there are cultural differences so fundamental that they lead to split up human society and probably lead to new kinds of quarrel globally (Houben, 2010). The most direct impact of those phenomena on academic shift, of course, is the re-focus on area studies, first and foremost with the concentration on Islamic studies. In a broader sense of intellectual institution, Southeast Asian studies can demonstrate its validity of knowledge production in a world not only becoming similar but also differentiated across regions, religions and cultures.

The coming back of Orientalism's critique and "Clash of Civilizations" discourse challenged the conventional perception and structure of area studies and led to a new configuration of the field in the post-Cold War and globalization context (Said, 2005; Huntington, 2007). Southeast Asian Studies now engages with a new era that due to emerging intellectual institutions of international studies across the world has to find other scholarly motivations upon the region itself. In its birthplace of Northern America, the scale of the field has declined dramatically and is becoming a sub-subject of trans-regional and globalization studies. At the same time and more intriguingly, another phenomenon has spectacularly occurred in Southeast Asia with the establishment of various centres, institutions and programs for Southeast Asian Studies run by local Southeast Asians who are expecting to replace the dominant role Western scholarship played during the last five decades. The consequence is, to geographically relocate focus on Southeast Asia to the region itself and anchor itself in local hands. It is the time for Southeast Asians to take responsibility for the subject of their reflection upon their region.

The campaign for decentering Southeast Asian Studies is not a unique phenomenon which is widely spreading in Asian scholarship. Among renowned advocates is the Taiwanese Kuan-Hsing Chen who recently called for critical intellectual thinking to use “Asia as Method” to decolonize and de-imperialize the production of knowledge in the post-Cold War (Chen, 2010:1-16). In Japan, the recent focus of the field is under reorientation to create “new perspectives for the global future based on the reality, knowledge and experiences of the region.” (Yasuyuki, 2014). These directions accelerate wider collaboration between various disciplines and fields of research to debunk the method and perspective of generating knowledge using either Cold War points of view or competing nationalism. To build a new structure for regional history and culture, it is necessary to acknowledge different connected, integrated, overlapping and contesting pasts long before national sentiments distance themselves from others. Therefore, the call for using the “Southeast Asian method” is not an ultimate response to changing institutional politics but comes at a time when a regional perspective is seeking ground in defining the region.

This paper argues for a new direction of doing Southeast Asian history in the context of ASEAN and globalization. By accelerating the network of young scholars in creating new approaches and knowledge production that not only reaches beyond conventional ideological differences and national boundaries but also characterizes a regional pattern of epistemology. The development of the field in Southeast Asia is parallel with the emergence of regionalism under the facility of ASEAN. The organization acts as a regional hub for not only political and economic integration but also academic and cultural. Southeast Asian studies emerging from such local perspectives have the capacity as a connected device for people across the region by producing mutual understanding and sharing knowledge among peoples crossing cultures, borderlines and religions. The regional context of knowledge production places new challenges on history education at the national level. Historically-related issues are among the major causes of countries’ hostility. The promotion of regional interaction, therefore, is hoped to strengthen new forms of educating Southeast Asian history by providing it with an academic and cultural foundation and bridging mistrust and antagonism towards the facilitation of ASEAN connectivity.

Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia

Decentralized Southeast Asian Studies created a more diverse intellectual landscape for local Southeast Asianists to engage with the subject that focuses on their region. In contrast to the decline witnessed across Europe and America, the dynamic development of the field in Southeast Asia provides energetic academic motivation. This phenomenon transforms the epistemological foundation of Southeast Asian studies globally by shifting the centers toward Southeast Asia and being conducted by Southeast Asians. Relocating knowledge production back to the region itself opens new prospects in which area studies enjoy the local environment and are exposed to local interest. Such development debunks the long-going debate on the binary view of “outside versus inside” in Southeast Asian Studies that has been around since the 1950s when a Dutch scholar made his renowned critique that Southeast Asia was being viewed from “the deck of the ship, the ramparts of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading house” (van Leur, 1955:261). Such epistemological inquiry has repeatedly appeared over generations of scholarship in Southeast Asian Studies and has been continuously propelling more efforts to accelerate local contribution in producing concepts and indigenous representations.

The rapid change of the academic landscape in the region produces a new underpinning and epistemological framework for the establishment of a “localized institution” of area studies. Leading universities in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam are running several world-class centers for Southeast Asian Studies and taking responsibility for replacing those of the outside where their ultimate interest in Southeast Asia likely retreats to the Arab world, China, Russia, Eastern Europe or Southern America. There are many to be named: National University of Singapore (NUS), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, University of Malaya, Malaysia (UM), Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University (Thailand), and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Vietnam) are playing a pioneering role for conducting research and offering a training program for scholars and students across the region.

Since their establishment, ISEAS (Singapore, 1971) and the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP, 1994) have made vibrant intellectual exchange both within and outside the region possible. Attempts to promote academic interaction are enormously assisting the vision of one ASEAN because at first, it allows intellectual communities in different countries the chance to integrate. Therefore, area studies developing locally are extremely significant more than ever before, not only for academic augmentation in each country but for the region as a whole in diversifying and reorienting regional knowledge as part of a wider cooperation project.

Thailand, located in the heart of the mainland has a geographically strategic advantage to the institute as a hub of area studies, especially in the Mekong countries. The region has a long history of interaction between ethnicity, cultures, kingdoms, colonial empires, and nation-states. Their rich cultural heritage and historical legacy are an essential part of regionalization under which every nation plays an equally crucial role in building regional conception. Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University are among the pioneers in providing area studies as research units and academic subjects, and by that able to offer an MA program in Southeast Asian Studies (at Chulalongkorn University), MA program in ASEAN Studies (Prithi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University), and various language training courses. With the support provided by international foundations, governmental organizations, and universities (Rockefeller Foundation, Kyoto University...) scholarships and opportunities are available for Southeast Asians approaching the field in their region. The Southeast Asia Studies Program at Chulalongkorn University, for instance, during the last ten years, has graduated quite several students, those who come both from within and outside the region to pursue master's studies, and many continue to do so in a larger academic network across the world for further engagement with the field.

A new generation of local scholars is emerging, who involve themselves variously with academic training both in Europe, Northern America, Australia and region-based institutions and are expected to diversify the state of the field. They are taking responsibility not only for challenging established knowledge created by the Western-centric approach used for centuries but also for raising “local” voices in the global context. The future of the field is beyond doubt going to fall into the hands of those whose integrated viewpoint would place the region as a major hub of the global academic landscape (King, 2006:38-39). The diverse group that is engaging with Southeast Asian Studies is also added to by many tracing their original linkages to the region. In the case of Vietnamese studies, for instance, Vietnamese

overseas in the US and Australia are playing an increasing role in the flourishing of the field, and bridging scholars in Vietnam and outside (Zinoman, 2003:295-307).

The growth of a region-based body of scholarship has the advantage of enduring discussion over “insider” and “outsider,” between the West and East in Southeast Asian Studies. Local Southeast Asianists also have great pride in their linguistic skill and familiarity with the social and political circumstances in which their research is conducted. They are not only expected to go beyond the Western approach of area studies or global studies but more importantly, to develop a new theoretical framework and approach for Southeast Asia itself beyond the Euro-American models. Some are anticipating such an epistemological underpinning as the “theory of the Global South.” (Rehbein, 2010). However, the sense of being “local” also creates its challenges, among those are neo-nationalist campaigns that in many cases bound the scholarly capacity to cross national and ethnic frontiers of political memory, as I will suggest in some detail below.

The ASEAN facilitation of communication and cooperation opens a new landscape for Southeast Asian Studies to flourish in the region. The ultimate goals of studying Southeast Asia have been shifting, not because of the need for building a colonial empire, Cold War policy or other outsider interests but to understand the region itself and to support the need for internal connectivity. Training programs and research agendas across the region also diversify conventional topics of the field. Among those, one significant mission is to help peoples in the region overcome competing historical legacies that maintain contention between regionalism and nationalism. National conflict, mistrustful stereotypes, antagonism, and territorial disputes offer all sorts of obstacles and erect cultural and political barriers among the peoples of Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The past is living among the present and preventing the future from mutual recognition among those groups.

To overcome a such challenge, it is time for Southeast Asian studies to revise some conventional assumptions and beliefs concerning the contemporary body of knowledge produced by Southeast Asians themselves. In Thai studies for example, Thongchai Winichakul once suggested that it is not the case that Thai people lack knowledge of the other, but the way they portray neighbors in history is variously biased and egocentric (Winichakul, 2005). Obviously in the mainland, ethnic penetration and political interaction have been shaped for millennia, and become a way of generating indigenous knowledge and perceptions of each other. However, local comprehension is not necessary to fall in line with the modern Western category of “area studies” and therefore has been neglected by Western academic recognition. Consequently, to the paradigm of Southeast Asian Studies we are developing in the region, those bodies of knowledge should be widely recognized and developed in the new context of regional integration rather than being isolated and antagonistic.

Sharing History: Legacies of the Past and Intercultural Dialogue

Legacy of the past is fundamental in shaping contemporary Southeast Asian knowledge and perceptions under which Southeast Asians self-imagine and portray each other. The politics of collective memory, competing nationalist narrative and colonial/imperial knowledge add biased reflection and unfriendly images of the neighbors. Those are significant obstacles to regional connectivity that prevent people from crossing over to different cultures,

histories and nations. Neighborhood in mainland Southeast Asia is characterized by much complexity of pride and prejudice. Nationalism versus regionalism has become popularized along with national-building and remains a major obstacle on the way to ASEAN's "one community, one destiny" (theme of the ASEAN Summit 2012, Cambodia). The field of knowledge in Southeast Asia is bounded by a general belief that people within are not ultimately interested in knowing their neighbors but the outside. Thai historian Chanvit Kasetseri points out the situation where Thais are likely Western-oriented when it comes to their attitude toward European and American societies. He employs a proverb that goes, "Klai klua kin dang" [Next to the salt, but take in the lime] to express the low-interest Thai owe to their immediate neighbors (Kasetsiri et al., 1995:9). The saying is metaphorically identical to that of Vietnamese, "But chua nha khong thieng" [Gods of the local temple are not miraculous (comparing to those outside)], to indicate the same level of neglect that distance that exists between Vietnam and Southeast Asian countries while glamorizing idealized models and values of the exotic.

As nationalist historiography is dominating our intellectual environment, media and journals are preoccupied with bias in daily expression and it causes misperceptions of other behavior and hostile attitudes toward the "historical debt" of invasion, territorial annexation and massacre. Disputes over a temple along the Thai-Cambodian border led to the burning of the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh in 2003. Since then, the Cambodian neo-nationalist movement emerged significantly under the leadership of politician Sam Rainsy whose announcement on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border is bringing back to mind some tragic pages of complex and ambiguous historical relations between the two over the Mekong Delta (Rainsy, 2013:43-62). His recent campaign is marked by a more aggressive attitude toward Vietnam, using the term "Yuan" to indicate "Vietnamese." (BBC Vietnamese, 2014). To his explanation, whether the term can be interpreted by any means, it brings back the specter of the past into the Vietnamese-Cambodian vulnerable relationship. By taking the political situation that the country had to face under Siamese-Vietnamese intervention in the early 19th century, some Cambodian politicians are misconstruing their vision in regional politics and manipulating historical legacies for politically motivated propaganda.

In the same struggle of narrating the past, Lao contesting precolonial historiography and politics of memory under both nationalist and Marxist ideology are implicit responses to Thai and Vietnamese national narratives. They most notably take into consideration notions of Laos origin and the rebellion of Chao Anou to signify a distinct set of characters and identities (Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, 1988; 1998; Pholsena, 2004). Lao people are trying to present their glorious path of history that they are not a subordinate of Siam or Vietnam. In the particular case of the Chao Anou, the event of 1827, it was not by any means the case of a disloyal vassal leading an unjustified rebellion, but a national hero trying to save his nation from the cultural, and physical annihilation forced by the aggressive Thai policies (Vickery, 1990:441; Goscha et al., 2003).

On the contrary, Thai writing of history is characterized by an egocentric viewpoint toward their neighbors. It was a "peaceful country that was repeatedly threatened by foreign enemies" who were either competing rivals or inferior and depended on it (Winichakul, 2005:123). From that perspective, the Burmese became a Thai age-old enemy whose vicious invasions brought severe destruction to Siam. The hatred was the product of the recompilation of Siamese ponsawadan after the defeat of Ayutthaya in 1767 (Chutintaranond, 1992; Chutintaranond, 1995). Recently the enmity has been reproduced in a new form of histori-

cal knowledge through commercial media: movies and TV dramas such as *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001) and *King Naresuan* (2007-2015) (Jory, 2003). To the East of Siam, was an image of another enemy, the Vietnamese/Yuan, “the race with many faces and many tricks up their sleeves.” (Puaksom, 2003:42). Accordingly, the Siamese once helped Vietnam to survive, but returned by improper acknowledgement. In addition, because of the Vietnamese claim over Laos and Cambodia, Thais lost their “territories” during the Franco-Siamese wars (which then became part of the French Indochina), and most recently, the threat of Vietnamese communism (Thongchai, 2005:120). A 1938 Thai textbook reminded the Siamese, “We must not forget the times when our country was invaded by enemies. During the Ayutthaya period, we fell to the Burmese two times. In the Bangkok era, we again lost our North-East Lao territory, Cambodia and Battambang monthon (district) to the French.” (Chutintaranond, 1992:97).

For writings of Vietnamese history, two contemporary tendencies reject a regional approach to the trans-Mekong historical theme. The first is the Viet-centric narrative in which Vietnamese history is generally viewed from the perspective of the ethnic majority and taking their viewpoint from a palace chronicle and political center as the dominant category of historical description. The second is the result of the nationalist revolution of the twentieth century that stressed xenophobia of the Vietnamese past. “Against foreign invasion” then is cast as the country’s most prominent identity and tradition which goes on for thousands of years. This creates intolerant feelings toward neighbors and their histories as “inferior” and “opposed” rather than friendly neighbors. Thailand, Cambodia and Laos were depicted as either vassal states or competitors/potential invaders in the region. It has been decades since the end of the Indochina War and the last gunshot rang out on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. Matters of war and conflict are out of date and it is the time for rewriting nationalist historiography. The new discourse is renavigating Vietnamese history as part of regional evolution, and by doing so, revealing a pattern of “global history” or “transnational history” that is drawing more integration with Vietnam’s neighboring Thai, Campa, Khmer, Lao, and many others.

The discrepancies in historical accounts among countries in the Mekong region erect cultural and political barriers that distance different bodies of knowledge and perception from mutual understanding and integration. Past legacies are creating mistrust and isolation among peoples in the mainland whose specter of the enemy and humiliated defeat still overshadow their vision of neighbors. Southeast Asian history in its new phase is assigned to the need to create a dialogue beyond nationalism and ethnocentrism, signifying millennia of sharing natural and human landscapes. Changing perceptions of the past allows us to engage with different perspectives and open discussion because there would be no better way to bridge the differences than by offering a transnational history that focuses on connecting pasts and human flows in time and space. Given the fact that modern nation-states in Southeast Asia are the product of the 20th-century nationalist movement, a regional historical version of the mainland should particularly concentrate on human interaction politically and culturally. Taking the Mekong for instance, it has been a common natural possession of various groups historically before it was divided by national boundaries. The river, therefore, was a field of human connectivity and exchange long before it became a subject of political contest. Such narrative creates a sense of interconnection under which each group relocates itself into a larger human society and cultural unit where Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are just elements of a diverse and dynamic linguistic and civilized structure.

There are still many myths on the mainland to be unraveled, especially mythical responses to emerging nationalism. Those images use potential foreign threats and symbols of aggressive foreigners as a source of inspiration for internal unity and for inventing national traditions. In most cases, however, projections of state-making were launched by political centers and capitals where local voices and knowledge have been sidelined and disregarded. Although recent critical scholarship has tended to debunk political essentialism by looking at the role of modern nation-states in self-imaging, very little effort has been paid to relationships among countries in times of competing nation-building. Regional intellectual dialogue has the advantage of going beyond egocentric and imperial knowledge by expanding various categories of “local knowledge.” (Winichakul, 2005:124). The approach encourages more integrated comprehension in addressing sensitive agendas among countries and playing as a connecting vehicle across political boundaries. I have mentioned the Mekong as common property, and many other transcultural heritages, architectural styles, temples, cults and beliefs... were commonly achieved by Tai, Viet, Lao, Khmer, Burmese, and hundreds of others. They should be subjects of celebration and mutual acknowledgment rather than sources of identity dispute and extreme-nationalist claims. The introduction of new bodies of knowledge that are shared by different perspectives and peoples also involves, not ignoring or avoiding sensitive issues, but putting them forward into open consideration and discussion. The gap between perception and different epistemological foundations can be overcome by encouraging scholarly negotiation, exchange dialogue, and the promotion of a regional approach. Take several research programs on the Mekong for instance, the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project (or LOMAP) begun in 1996 and the Greater Angkor Project run by the University of Sydney in cooperation with Southeast Asian institutions and scholars shed new light upon the wide range of interconnections economically, politically and religiously across different natural landscapes and ethnic groups. From the Funan kingdom to the Khmer empire in the classical age to the intermingling and dynamic mobilization of Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, Khmer and others across the Mekong in the early modern times, the river was a field of human dynamism and was not a subject of a claim by anyone before the coming of the western colonial era (Winichakul 1994). People along the Mekong even expanded their network of trade and cultural exchange along valleys and mountains up to the Vietnamese Central Highland and strengthened their political lineage for centuries (Salemink, 2008:51-69; 2011:27-50).

The formation of ASEAN's cultural identity, it may be argued, must be grounded in the shared historical legacies and solidarities of Southeast Asian communities whose interactions extend back thousands of years. From the maritime networks of Austronesian-speaking populations - the so-called Nusantara - that began some 5,000 years ago, to the commercial exchanges among coastal, lowland, and upland groups along what scholars describe as riverine exchange systems, these interconnections have long shaped the political, economic, and commercial landscapes of the region (Bronson, 1979; Solheim, 2007). This was, in effect, a “sea common to all” where cultures and languages were bound together, resources shared, commodities exchanged, and vital ecological spaces interwoven (Lockard, 2010). For the mainland populations, the Annamite Cordillera - often imagined as a formidable geographic barrier - was in reality a dynamic arena of exchange among Khmer, Cham, Lao, Vietnamese, and the diverse upland groups inhabiting what is today Vietnam's Central Highlands. Here, networks of trade in eaglewood, ivory, salt, iron, gold, ceramics, and dried fish were indispensable to the survival and cohesion of these commu-

nities (Hickey, 1982; Tran, 2015; Tran and Nakamura, 2018; Griffiths, Hardy, and Wade, eds, 2019). By the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese reached Malacca, they encountered a city that had become a marketplace between East and West, offering not only goods from India and China but also the diverse products of Southeast Asian societies - from Cochinchina, Ayutthaya, and Java, among others (Pires, 1944). The model of Malacca, however, was not unique. Similar patterns of interconnected urban-commercial nodes could be found across both the mainland and the archipelagos of Southeast Asia, stretching from Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, Hoi An, Hà Tiên, Angkor, and Ayutthaya to Palembang and the Maluku Spice Islands (Breazeale, ed. 1999; Wheeler, 2001; Tara, and Irving, eds. 2013; Baker and Phongpaichit, 2017; Ang, 2019; Hang, 2024).

As the Thai historian Sunait Chutintaranond has observed in his discussion of the region's intense interconnectivity, "Located on the international business route, Southeast Asia became a melting pot of cultures" (Guo, 2019). This condition fostered a strong sense of belonging, as well as the sharing of resources and cultural practices, which became integral to the collective identity of Southeast Asia (Buathong and Binson, 2020). For this reason, much of the region's heritage reflects deep patterns of cultural resonance and historical interaction. Moreover, the history of Southeast Asia is equally a history of joint struggles against common external threats. In the thirteenth century, the peoples of Champa, Dai Viet, Java, and Burma fought together to resist the Mongol invasions; centuries later, the Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao peoples joined in resistance against French colonial expansion. In 1865, the Khmer monk Pou Kombo launched a rebellion against both French authority and the Norodom dynasty in Kompong Cham and Kompong Thom (Cambodia), as well as in Châu Doc, Tây Ninh, and the Dong Tháp Muoi region of Vietnam. The uprising drew together Khmer, Stieng, Cham, Mnong, and Vietnamese communities along the frontier corridor in a shared struggle against a common enemy. Pou Kombo allied with the Vietnamese leader Truong Quyen, creating one of the most vigorous episodes of anti-French resistance in the 1860s-Lower Mekong (Maître, 1912:492). Episodes such as these are not isolated but rather characteristic of the millennia-long history of interaction among Southeast Asian societies. They continue to provide inspiration for contemporary forms of regional solidarity, particularly when such legacies are embraced as part of a shared cultural and historical identity.

Networks of ASEAN's Young Scholarship

The focus on Southeast Asian Studies in the region deserves more investment from the young generation of scholars in producing a dynamic intellectual network. They embody new production of knowledge and will be taking responsibility for regional connectivity and cooperation in the coming decades. Their advantages are that young scholars in the field are open to abundant viewpoints from local, regional to global perspectives. They also have no direct engagement with warfare and ideological hostility. Despite that fact, however, it does not necessarily mean they cannot sometimes become victims of nationalist propaganda through nationalist historical teaching. Other problems may come from their lack of interest in studying neighbors while a lot of attention has been directed to outside fancy attractions such as Japan, Korea, Europe and America. The lack of interest in contemporary regional updates in the case of Vietnam for instance is spreading among people and policy-makers alike. On January 7th, 2013, Cambodia presented the homegrown electric car, Angkor EV 2013 which surprised and embarrassed many Vietnamese. Despite

of request made by the Vietnamese government, the Lao hydropower project of Xayaburi is going ahead with construction. When Cambodia refused to bring the South China Sea/East Sea to the agenda of the ASEAN Summit 2012, the Vietnamese were shocked, taking into account the friendship and neighborhood between the two. And most recently, Vietnamese shops in Phnom Penh became targets of a neo-nationalist movement led by the Cambodian opposition party. Dramatic change occurring regionally challenges the conventional mindset of the Vietnamese. A traditional “ally” during the Cold War and “National Liberation” has been disrupted significantly and a new geopolitical structure of the Mekong region is being formed which for many Vietnamese means they are left behind because of their out-of-date and downward-looking perspective toward their neighbors. Their view of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar is acquired through some preconceptions, biased media and stereotypes rather than first-hand information on the ground.

In my view, the strengthening of networks of ASEAN’s young scholarship not only promotes opportunity for people-to-people relationships and connectivity but more importantly, their intellectual mindset and influence disseminate, changing often negative perceptions of neighbors. Images of past enemies, therefore, are able to be converted into potential partners and friends for the present and future. The young intellectual network in the region has a greater change than ever to strengthen connectivity and shift the conventional focus from “outsider” to “insider” because of emerging opportunities to cooperate and pursue education, business and travel in the region. The prospect not only involves transforming the region from “battlefield to market” but also all sorts of exchange and connection under the facilitation of ASEAN’s regionalized project. To do so, legal frameworks and political will are not sufficient, but a strong cultural foundation that supports people’s awareness of regional unity, diversity and interdependence.

The new scholarly network in the region needs a concrete vision for dialogue of sharing history and culture. There are gatherings and networks for the young scholarship that are providing support or bringing together junior researchers in training. Since 2005, the Asian Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has provided the annual “Asian Graduate Student Fellowship,” a three-month training program for mostly Southeast Asian graduate students to conduct their research, consult with experts and utilize academic facilities. The fellowship makes a significant contribution to the intellectual development of many young scholars who have a chance to widen their academic connections and greatly benefit from a dynamic exchange at ARI and NUS for their further achievement. Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) and the Empowering Network of International Thai Studies (ENIT, Thai Studies Institute, Chulalongkorn University) provide annual financial support for graduate students to conduct research on transnational Southeast Asian studies subjects, or focus on Thailand as in case of the later. Other institutions such as the Southeast Asian Studies Program (Chulalongkorn University) and Center for Khmer Studies (CKS, Cambodia) also offer with it an academic program and internships for students and researchers across the region. It is tremendously valuable for young scholars to engage with those regional dialogues for discussion and exchange because of generates the possibility that they can work together, sharing ideas and building up integrated perspectives. It also helps young Southeast Asianists to keep updated with recent developments that happen with their neighbors as well as redirecting their focus more on regional tendencies and phenomena.

Scholarly communication in Southeast Asian studies is increasingly significant to weave a mosaic of linguistic diversity (Chou et al., 2006:18). Although English is recognized as *lingua franca* for intellectual exchange in the region, the need for linguistic training for young researchers to master another local language is essential and irresistible for any attempt to connect Southeast Asia. The recent withdrawal of foundations such as the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation resulted in enormous challenges for those who benefited from training programs that promoted linguistic and intellectual interaction. To some extent, it reveals some of the weaknesses of Southeast Asian Studies run by the “locals,” and lack of financial support and facilities, especially in the case of less developed countries. Organizations at higher levels of authority such as ASEAN and SEAMEO may need to put more effort into organizing not only official meetings but also scholarly gatherings and intellectual dialogues in the region. ASEAN’s projection of connectivity and emerging local area studies pose strong challenges to interconnection and mutual dependence. While ASEAN provides an institution and political landscape for the emerging regional intellectual field, the new approach of area studies disseminates local knowledge in a more integrated and region-wide perspective. The transnational knowledge production would lay cultural establishment for new regional perception and consciousness of the past through interacted historical narrative.

At present, however, there remains a pressing need for stronger commitment and sustained reinforcement in initiating and maintaining dialogue among Southeast Asianists within the region - particularly on the mainland - in order to bring scholars together, connect ideas, and mobilize intellectual engagement. One of the central challenges lies in financial resources, which constitute a crucial condition for scholarly exchange and collaboration across Southeast Asia. Traditional sources of external funding have declined significantly over the past decade, a consequence of the global economic slowdown and shifting geopolitical priorities in the post-Cold War era. Although the United States has pledged a “pivot” back to the Asia-Pacific, support for Southeast Asian studies has been considerably reduced. In 2009, for example, the Ford Foundation withdrew from Vietnam and closed its Hanoi office. Likewise, the Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored program Weaving the Mekong into Southeast Asia (WMESEA) Fellowship Program, which funded master’s degrees in Southeast Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University, was discontinued. Several long-standing programs supported by the European Union have also been terminated, creating substantial obstacles for early-career researchers in the region. In this context, strengthening cooperation, enhancing academic exchange networks, and securing funding sources from within Southeast Asia itself have become increasingly important. The establishment of regional and local funding mechanisms for Southeast Asian studies must become a priority for both public and private sectors. The creation of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community in 2015 underscores the need for new cooperative mechanisms capable of translating this vision into practice. Yet in reality, this imperative has not received adequate attention from governments in the region. In addition, regional university systems can play a pivotal role by supporting exchange programs and internships, a model that has been implemented successfully in the European Union. At present, many Southeast Asian universities already maintain student and scholar exchange schemes and have signed memoranda of understanding for institutional collaboration, but the results achieved thus far have not matched expectations. The successful realization of such academic connectivity would demonstrate ASEAN not as an abstract political slogan but as a tangible project that inspires and enriches the daily lives of its people.

Conclusion

The study of Southeast Asian history is facing new challenges and opportunities in ASEAN and global contexts. A new paradigm of “Southeast Asian Studies” conducted by local Southeast Asianists is entering a critical moment in producing more integrated comprehension for the assistance of regionalism. Globalization and emerging global studies on the other hand confront conventional area studies following the Euro-American model and shifting the field of knowledge into a more diverse and dynamic landscape. Decentering knowledge production of Southeast Asian Studies allows the region becomes the new center of the field. Widespread established institutions in regional countries pave the way for integrating scholarship and enriching transnational dialogue that significantly contributes to the promotion of ASEAN projection.

For the ASEAN community and connectivity, teaching history can play a significant role in producing implementation that helps Southeast Asians overcome competing historical legacies across political and cultural boundaries. The regional consciousness is indispensable for regionalization because of its functional activeness in bridging peoples whose vision is of integrating the future and sharing the benefit and interdependence of undergoing ASEAN incorporation. In this context, academic institutionalization expects to be part of the projection by appreciating a new generation of Southeast Asianists who are responsible for both the future of teaching Southeast Asian history and the making of ASEAN's integration.

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Interpreting Literary Heritage: “Lilit Phra Law” Through Dance

*as Part of Heritage Interpretation for
the 21st Century*

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Abstract

This article explores how literary heritage can be reinterpreted through creative dance to sustain its relevance in the 21st century. It derives from a dissertation-length study entitled “Interpreting Literary Heritage: Lilit Phra Law through Dance as Part of Heritage Interpretation for the 21st Century.” The research employed six methods: literature review, personal experiential analysis, field studies, media exploration, symposium discussions, and structured interviews. Data collection was conducted in Thailand from March 2004 to April 2024, involving performing arts professionals, music and drama academics, senior practitioners from the Office of Performing Arts, the Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture, and both Thai and international audiences. The findings propose a conceptual model for adapting dance from literary sources as a form of heritage interpretation, demonstrating how creative dance can contribute to the revitalization and sustainability of Thai performing arts within a rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

Keywords: *Creative Dance, Heritage Interpretation, Thai Performing Arts, Literary Adaptation, Contemporary Choreography, Lilit Phra Law*

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Introduction

Thailand is renowned for its rich and diverse artistic heritage, which continues to fascinate visitors from around the world. This heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible forms. Tangible heritage includes architecture and visual arts, while intangible heritage, as Weeranuj Maithai notes, “comprises oral traditions, languages, music, dance and performing arts, crafts, and customs, including those of minority and indigenous peoples” (Maithai, 2000:17). Like literature and mural painting, these artistic expressions are now recognized as integral components of Thailand’s cultural identity, having developed over centuries and requiring careful preservation for transmission to future generations.

Thai art is characterized by its interconnectedness, where different forms influence and inspire one another. These traditions can be seen as distinct streams flowing into the same cultural river. Music and dance, sculpture and dance, painting and dance – all have evolved in dialogue with one another, while stories from Thailand’s rich oral and literary traditions have profoundly shaped the development of Thai dance.

The origins of storytelling through dance in Thailand are difficult to trace, but evidence suggests that the practice dates back centuries. By the Sukhothai period, when the foundations of modern Thailand were emerging, inscriptions indicate that dance was central to both popular entertainment and ceremonial events for the ruling elites. As Mattani Mojara Rutnin observes, “In the descriptions of state and religious ceremonies in the second part of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription, the author notes the freedom to pursue personal pleasure and entertainment in Sukhothai, of which music and dance were the essential parts” (Rutnin, 1996:26).

Similarly, Jukka O. Miettinen highlights that “Thai classical dance is the result of a long development and the fusion of varied cultural elements” (Miettinen, 1992:47-48). Among these traditions, the *Manora* folk tale from Southern Thailand plays a central role. Dhanit Yupho explains that “the plot of the *lakon jatri* was based on the folktale of *Manohra*, abbreviated in the regular southern Thai fashion into ‘*nora*’ or ‘*nora jatri*.’ However, modern *nora jatri* dance dramas now incorporate other stories as well” (Yupho, 1963:75).

Even today, audiences attending dance performances in Thailand – whether classical or contemporary – often seek narrative meaning, underscoring the enduring importance of storytelling in Thai dance. Although Thailand may not be considered a “literary” culture in the strictest sense, stories, many of which were transmitted orally over generations before being recorded, have always held a central role in the performing arts. This deep interconnection demonstrates how the Thai performing arts and storytelling traditions have been shaped by, and have incorporated, cross-cultural influences from other Asian traditions over the centuries.

Despite the richness of this heritage, sustained efforts at the governmental level to develop, promote, or preserve traditional performing arts have been limited. While there have been initiatives aimed at conservation, commercialization, or artistic development, they have achieved only limited success in influencing public perception. As a result, traditional Thai performing arts remain marginalized, and there is a growing concern that, without meaningful intervention, these art forms face the real risk of disappearing before the end of the 21st century.

Aims of the Research

This study is guided by a central research question and defined research objectives. Its primary aim is to examine the process of reinterpreting literary heritage through dance as a means of supporting heritage interpretation in the 21st century. Specifically, the study seeks to develop conceptual and practical models for the integration of dance and performing arts into strategies for arts and heritage conservation.

Within this framework, the research addresses the guiding question: How can dance and the performing arts be used to reinterpret Thai literary and oral traditions as part of heritage interpretation in the 21st century?

Scope of Research

This research examines the role of innovative performing arts in the interpretation of literary and oral heritage, using the case study production *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) as its primary focus. The study evaluates this production with the aim of establishing a conceptual framework that supports the integration of performing arts into strategies for literary and oral heritage conservation.

Within this context, the evaluation concentrates on identifying methods for developing appropriate interpretive approaches that respect and preserve the cultural significance of the source material while simultaneously maintaining artistic integrity and creative freedom.

Assumptions

This research is based primarily on the urban dance production *Lilit Phra Law*, staged in Thailand on 14 January 2005 at the open space in front of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, and on 1–2 February 2005 at Hall 5 of the Impact Exhibition Centre as part of the 2005 Thailand Innovations' Day Exhibition. This work was selected because it embodies multiple concerns relevant to creators seeking to engage with literary and broader arts heritage traditions through innovative performing arts practices.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) productions examined in this study represent a medium-scale case involving 30 dancers, demonstrating how resources and performance spaces can be effectively utilized to maximize artistic and interpretive impact. *Lilit Phra Law* is deeply rooted in Thai cultural identity, attributed to an anonymous poet from the early Ayutthaya period, while simultaneously belonging to a broader, universal literary tradition. Its narrative resonates with themes of fate, intergenerational conflict, and tragic love, paralleling timeless stories such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This duality underscores the enduring relevance of the work while raising critical questions regarding how national traditions can be adapted and reinterpreted with authenticity and cultural respect.

For this study, the analysis concentrates on the conceptual framework of adapting literature into dance rather than focusing on the detailed interpretation of individual words or verses. This approach reflects the nature of the production, which was conceived as a dance-based performance rather than a literal, text-driven mime.

Methodology

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods to examine the reinterpretation of literary and oral heritage through creative dance. The research integrated multiple approaches to ensure methodological rigor and academic depth.

The investigation began with archival research conducted at the libraries of the Thai Fine Arts Department, enabling access to extensive local scholarship, expert analyses, and historical resources. Dance-related sources, both Thai and international, that explored adaptations and interpretations of literature through performance were also systematically reviewed.

Personal experience constituted another dimension of the research, involving an in-depth examination of previous work in the artistic and dance fields through the study of video recordings, visual documentation, and printed records. Central to the study was the close analysis of three featured works – *Narai Avatara*, *Phramahachanok*, and *Ngo-Pa* – which formed the primary axis around which other lines of inquiry were developed.

The project also incorporated interviews and participatory observation. In-depth personal and small group interviews were conducted with performing arts professionals, officials from the Fine Arts Department, and both Thai and international audience members to capture diverse perspectives on performance and interpretation.

Further, the research included active engagement in academic symposia and festivals, such as the Southeast Asian Performing Arts Symposium held at Bangkok University in November 2003, the 4th International Symposium on Creative Fine Arts (ISCFA) held at Phranakhon Si Ayutthaya Rajabhat University in 2023, and the International Festival of Arts (IFA) hosted by Srinakharinwirot University in 2024. These academic platforms provided valuable opportunities for comparative discussion and the integration of multiple regional perspectives.

Recognizing that live performance lies at the heart of the performing arts, direct engagement with live productions formed a critical component of the methodology. Observing and analyzing live performances offered insights into the dynamic relationship between creative practice and heritage interpretation. Collectively, these examples establish models demonstrating how innovative performing arts practices can function as active forms of heritage conservation and reinterpretation in contemporary contexts.

The Lilit Phra Law (2005) Production

The traditional Thai folk narrative of *Phra Law* is closely associated with the northern province of Phrae and remains one of the most celebrated works of Thailand's literary heritage. The story revolves around the tragic fate of *Phra Law*, a handsome young hero, and the two beautiful princesses, *Phra Phuen* and *Phra Phaeng*, who fall deeply in love with him.

At the heart of the narrative lies the rivalry between two royal families from neighboring kingdoms, whose long-standing enmity ultimately drives the events of the story. The tale unfolds against a backdrop of conflict, culminating in tragedy: *Phra Law*, *Phra Phuen*, and *Phra Phaeng* die in each other's arms, surrounded by the loyal servants who also perished in their defense.

The devastating outcome plunges both kingdoms into profound mourning, symbolizing the enduring tension between love, loyalty, and familial duty. This timeless narrative of passion and fate resonates with universal themes, reinforcing *Lilit Phra Law* as a cornerstone of Thai cultural and literary identity and providing a rich source of inspiration for its reinterpretation through dance and performance.



Figure 1. The image depicts Song forces recovering the body of their deceased king in the opening scene, with the intention of restoring him to his rightful kingdom.



Figure 2. The image captures the climactic death scene in the final act, illustrating how the stepped entrance is effectively utilized to produce a visually striking composition designed to leave a lasting impression on the audience.

While the precise origins of the *Phra Law* story remain uncertain, the earliest known written version appears in the *lilit* verse form and is attributed to an anonymous author of the Ayutthaya period. As Thammarong Boonrach explains, “The language of the *lilit* is now

somewhat obscure and not so accessible for contemporary Thai audiences” (interview, April 12, 2024). However, in the *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, the original poetic text was intentionally used as the narration. This deliberate decision served to highlight the aesthetic qualities of the poetry, emphasizing its sonic beauty and literary artistry.

By grounding the performance in the authentic source material, the production not only pays tribute to the anonymous author who preserved this traditional narrative but also reanimates the text through dance enactment on stage. This creative integration transforms the poetry into a living experience that resonates with audiences, enabling them to connect more deeply with a work that might otherwise remain linguistically or culturally inaccessible.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production thus illustrates how dance can serve as a powerful medium for exploring and reinterpreting complex literary traditions, especially those that contemporary audiences may find challenging due to linguistic shifts or changes in cultural sensibilities. Notably, the production was performed by a young cast, demonstrating how new generations can engage meaningfully with their heritage. This approach also highlights how creative deployment of diverse resources – from staging and narration to performer training – can maximize the artistic and interpretive potential of a production.

Building upon the insights gained from the analysis of the featured works, this study proposes a conceptual model for adapting dance from literary sources as a method of heritage interpretation. Furthermore, it expands the discussion by considering how dance and the performing arts can be employed as dynamic tools of artistic reinterpretation to sustain and revitalize Thai arts in the 21st century.

Suggested Model for the Creative Process of Adapting Dance from Literary Sources as Part of Heritage Interpretation for the 21st Century

1. Root to Branch: Working with the Text in Performance

As discussed earlier, when a performance is deeply rooted in its traditional source, it can communicate that heritage from the inside out, even when its external form does not overtly rely on the source text. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate this principle.

In the context of Renaissance theatre, Mary Clarke and Clement Crisp cite John Evelyn’s diary entry from 1645 describing a Venetian performance:

“We went to the Opera, where comedies and other plays are represented in recitative music, by the most excellent musicians, vocal and instrumental...”
(Clarke & Crisp, 1978:27).

Similarly, in the sphere of new media installations, Wang Shaoqiang explains the interactive work *Fire & Ice*, inspired by Robert Frost’s famous poem:

“Cinimod Studio produced an interactive art installation at West Quay Shopping Centre in Southampton” (Shaoqiang, 2018:102).

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production exemplifies this principle in a Thai context. Its introduction was sung in the traditional vocal style of Nan province, where the story is believed to have originated. This artistic device used the acoustic qualities of the poem and the sung style to immediately draw the audience into the emotive world of the performance, quickly establishing its mood and atmosphere.

Following the opening sequence, however, the remainder of the poem was spoken rather than sung. Traditionally, the original *Phra Law* text is performed in the *lilit* style, which is highly melodic but significantly more time-consuming. By reciting the poem as the accompaniment to the dance performance, the production integrated the entire original text seamlessly into the choreography. This approach allowed the audience to comprehend the narrative meaning while simultaneously experiencing the subtle musicality and aesthetic beauty of the text in full. Such integration fosters deeper audience engagement and can inspire greater interest in the original literary work and its broader cultural context.

These examples collectively demonstrate that working with the original text should not be perceived as a limitation. Instead, it provides a creative platform from which innovative, engaging, and culturally resonant performances can evolve, ensuring that heritage-based artistic practices remain vital and accessible to contemporary audiences.

2. Authenticity

For any production seeking to conserve, reinterpret, or raise awareness of traditional heritage, authenticity is a central concern. Grounding the performance in primary traditional sources, while also incorporating subsidiary references to support interpretive decisions, ensures that the production retains a strong sense of cultural integrity and an authentic aesthetic character.

However, it is important to recognize that a performance based entirely on “traditional” forms – adhering strictly to conventional aesthetics and staging – may succeed in demonstrating authenticity but often fails to sustain audience engagement. While an awareness of tradition remains fundamental, innovation is equally vital. Striking a balance between honoring the authentic source and integrating creative techniques allows choreographers to produce performances that both preserve heritage and speak effectively to contemporary audiences.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production demonstrates this principle. In terms of music and narration, the spoken delivery of the original text achieves authenticity while departing from its traditional sung form, thus making the narrative more accessible to modern audiences. Similarly, in the area of costume and visual composition, the production illustrates how modern design elements can be harmonized with heritage markers. While the costumes are contemporary in cut and material, subtle symbolic details – such as wraparound scarves and parasol props – evoke traditional Thai identity and help situate the performance within its cultural context. These choices reflect an informed engagement with subsidiary sources while ensuring that costume design also meets the practical needs of dancers, enabling freedom of movement and expressive clarity.



Figure 3. Contemporary costumes evoke authentic Thai heritage through subtle elements such as wraparound scarves, parasols, and puppetry, effectively situating the narrative while enabling unrestricted movement and indicating that the represented character existed before the main action.

For authenticity to achieve its intended impact as part of heritage interpretation, it must be aesthetic, integrated, and appealing rather than rigidly imposed. In the *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, authenticity functions as a seamless dimension of innovation, enhancing the visual power and narrative depth of the work. This approach generates a heightened sense of spectacle capable of attracting wider audiences while avoiding the superficiality often associated with purely commercialized dance productions. By recreating traditional images within a dynamic creative framework, the performance draws attention to the richness of Thai literary and cultural traditions, encouraging audiences to rediscover their value and reaffirming that traditional Thai performances remain worth watching and Thai literature remains worth reading.

3. Multi-Disciplinary Approach

Throughout the 20th century, the distinctions between different art forms have become increasingly fluid, leading to a greater degree of cross-disciplinary exchange within the performing and visual arts. As Suwannee Jalanugrasa, a National Artist in Thai traditional dance, noted:

“Thus, my heart was opened wide enough to admire with no prejudice new Thai dance styles resulting from the combination of Thai and Western traditions”
(Interview, March 29, 2004).

This evolving perspective highlights the integration of diverse artistic practices as a response to shifting cultural contexts. Dance has moved beyond the proscenium stage, increasingly intersecting with visual arts, media installations, and performance environments. For any creation intended to function as a form of heritage conservation, it is crucial to engage with the contemporary arts landscape while also remaining grounded in

cultural authenticity. One effective strategy is adopting a multi-disciplinary approach, combining diverse movement vocabularies such as Western modern dance and Thai folk dance traditions.

Modern dance, widely recognized as a theatrical form distinct from classical ballet, emerged as a radical departure from ballet's structural formalism. As Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell explain:

"Modern dance developed in opposition to classical ballet, rejecting the latter's structural formality and sometimes thematic frivolity. Modern dance pioneers eschewed the rigid hierarchy of ballet in favor of a freer movement style, favoring bare feet over pointe shoes, for example"(Craine & Mackrell, 2000:328).

The early 20th-Century pioneers of modern dance – including Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey – not only revolutionized movement aesthetics but also developed distinct teaching methodologies to support new choreographic techniques.

In contrast, Thai regional folk dances display a rich diversity of stylistic forms:

1. Northern dances (*fon*) are slow and graceful, characterized by simple and harmonious hand, arm, and leg movements.
2. Northeastern dances (*soeng*) employ faster steps and tempo, embodying a lively and celebratory energy.
3. Central Thai folk dances – such as *ram srinuan* and *ram prop kai* – are noted for their refinement and elegance.
4. Southern dances (*ram sat*), particularly the renowned *ram sat charti*, feature fast rhythms and swift hand and leg movements, reflecting influences from Indian and Sri Lankan Kandyen dance traditions.

As Mattani Moj dara Rutnin explains:

"Each of the four regions of Thailand has its own indigenous folk dances, usually associated with agricultural and social activities, such as rice planting, harvesting, festivals, and religious celebrations. The styles of these regional dances are unique to the localities and temperament of the local peoples"
(Rutnin, 1996:2).

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production demonstrates the creative potential of a multi-disciplinary approach. Here, the stage space operates as a blank canvas, integrating movement, visual composition, music, and design to form a multi-layered performance structure. Through the careful fusion of diverse movement vocabularies, visual arts, and culturally embedded symbols, the production achieves a richer aesthetic dimension and a wider audience appeal while remaining deeply anchored in heritage interpretation.

4. *Appropriate Communication for the Target Audience*

The principal branches of the performing arts – including dance, drama, music, and their various sub-genres – are fundamentally concerned with communication. As Bauman observes:

“In the performing arts, this distinction can be seen in the contrast between composed guidelines or models for artistic presentations, such as playscripts or musical scores, and the presentational rendition of those works before an audience”
(Bauman, 1992:41).

Furthermore, as Sharpe emphasizes:

“Good interpretation should be entertaining, in order to maintain the interest of an audience”
(Sharpe, 1985:129–130).

For a performance to effectively convey heritage value or communicate conservation messages, it must engage its target audience with clarity and impact. The performing arts are, by nature, dynamic modes of storytelling, sharing moods, narratives, and teachings through multiple layers of expression. Literature, similarly, communicates meaning through textual richness; however, the performing arts offer creators an expanded sensory and symbolic palette through which those meanings can be interpreted, visualized, and shared. To achieve this, performers and choreographers must consider their audience carefully when developing a production.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, performed by university students at Chulalongkorn University, provides a compelling example. Although designed primarily for an art house audience, the production successfully employed a cohesive combination of sung and spoken text, traditional Thai music, evocative costumes, and choreographic innovation. This integration created a work that was modern and experimental, yet authentic in spirit, making the performance both culturally relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences.

The production also leveraged the distinct technical strengths of its performers to maximize audience engagement. For example, in the cockerel scene, traditional Thai dance techniques were fused with contemporary lifts, heightening the dramatic intensity and visual impact. The image of a skilled female dancer being lifted gracefully by supporting “hunter” dancers created a memorable spectacle and a sense of virtuosic performance quality. These elements demonstrate how technical expertise, combined with innovative staging, can enhance the audience’s emotional and aesthetic experience.

Additionally, the production made deliberate use of ensemble performers to create symbolic scenery, encouraging the audience to reflect more deeply on the narrative and its layered meanings. The multi-sensory composition of movement, sound, and imagery worked together to draw audiences into the world of the story, prompting both performers and spectators to engage critically with its symbolism and cultural resonance.



Figure 4. *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) integrates ballet and contemporary dance techniques, featuring the cockerel dancer's elevation supported by "hunter" dancers, showcasing refined technical skill and dynamic staging to create an impactful display of contemporary virtuosity.

Designed to appeal to university students and arts connoisseurs, *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) adopted a suggestive dance-theatre style, merging traditional Thai aesthetics with contemporary choreographic practices. This experimental format demonstrates that innovation and authenticity need not exist in opposition. On the contrary, high production values and thoughtful creative strategies can amplify the communicative power of the performance while preserving the integrity of the literary source.

5. Living Heritage

The narrative of *Phra Law*, with its striking parallels to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, represents a timeless story embedded within both Thai and universal literary traditions. However, works of this nature can present a particular challenge: when audiences are already familiar with the plot, they may engage less deeply with its symbolic meanings and underlying messages. As Alpin observes:

"It should be possible to paint such information in a positive light and impart it without overt attempts at pure entertainment, provided the visitor's interest is gained and maintained" (Alpin, 2002:42).

This insight highlights the unique potential of the performing arts to reinvigorate audience engagement with heritage literature, helping viewers reconnect with themes of wisdom, morality, and human experience that transcend time.

The *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production exemplifies this capacity by using contemporary performance strategies to highlight the enduring relevance of traditional narratives. As Vijjuta Vudhaditya reflected:

“The more ‘new age’ predominantly black costumes and contemporary and ballet-influenced choreography constantly remind the audience that the performance is not confined to a particular time, but is so relevant now” (interview, May 5, 2024).

By integrating modern costuming, innovative staging, and contemporary choreographic vocabularies, the production communicates that *Phra Law* is not a relic of the past, but a living narrative that resonates strongly with present-day audiences. The approach bridges temporal and cultural divides, inviting viewers to interpret the story’s themes – particularly those concerning love, loyalty, conflict, and reconciliation – within the context of their own lives.

The performance’s final scene is especially significant, leaving audiences with not merely a striking visual image, but also one of profound symbolic value. Through its composition, the scene emphasizes the destructive consequences of sustaining old enmities, reinforcing the narrative’s timeless moral relevance.

When a performance successfully establishes, deepens, or renews the connection between audience and source, it fulfills one of the key aims of heritage interpretation: demonstrating that traditional works remain vital and meaningful within contemporary society. For performing arts engaged in heritage conservation, this ability to make the past speak powerfully to the present is essential in ensuring that cultural narratives continue to live, evolve, and inspire.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that dance and the performing arts can serve as powerful tools for reinterpreting Thai literary and oral traditions within the framework of heritage interpretation in the 21st century. Through an in-depth analysis of the *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) production, the research proposes five interrelated models for employing dance and performance in heritage conservation:

1. Root to Branch – anchoring performances in authentic textual sources while expanding creative expression through innovative staging.
2. Authenticity – integrating cultural integrity into the creative process while allowing space for contemporary reinterpretation.
3. Multi-Disciplinary Approach – combining diverse movement vocabularies, visual arts, and music to construct dynamic performance frameworks.
4. Appropriate Communication for the Target Audience – tailoring the aesthetic and interpretive strategies to ensure accessibility and audience engagement.
5. Living Heritage – demonstrating how traditional narratives remain relevant to contemporary social and cultural contexts.

As discussed, the reinterpretation of traditional arts for new generations remains an area of research that has received limited scholarly attention. By addressing this gap, the study

provides both a conceptual framework and practical insights for sustaining and revitalizing Thai performing arts in a rapidly evolving cultural environment.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the urgent need to raise public awareness of Thailand's artistic heritage and to foster a renewed appreciation of traditional literature, performance practices, and cultural narratives. By positioning the performing arts as dynamic agents of cultural continuity, this research contributes to heritage preservation while simultaneously encouraging innovation that resonates with contemporary audiences.

In conclusion, this study positions dance as both a conservator and innovator of cultural heritage, demonstrating its capacity to revitalize traditional narratives while simultaneously shaping new artistic expressions. By integrating insights from *Lilit Phra Law* (2005) with broader choreographic trends identified by Chandnasaro (2025:59–60), the findings highlight how Thai performing arts can remain vibrant, adaptive, and relevant in an increasingly interconnected world.

Heritage-based performances must therefore be approached not as static relics, but as living, evolving practices capable of resonating with diverse audiences while honoring cultural origins. Through this dual role, dance emerges as a transformative medium, bridging the past, present, and future while ensuring that Thailand's rich artistic legacy continues to inspire, educate, and thrive on both local and international stages.

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The Impact of K-Pop on Thai Popular Music:

A Study of Cross-Cultural Communication & Influence

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Abstract

This study examines K-Pop's influence on Thai popular music, focusing on cross-cultural communication and its impact on the Thai music industry. Using a mixed-methods approach including content analysis, interviews with industry professionals, and a consumer survey, this study investigate changes in musical style, production, marketing, and audience reception. The findings reveal significant K-Pop-influenced shifts in Thai pop music, encompassing musical composition, visual aesthetics, artist development, and fan engagement. The study argues this phenomenon represents a complex interplay of cultural adaptation and localization rather than mere imitation, reflecting broader cultural globalization trends. The study provides insights into the negotiation between global influences and local cultural contexts in the music industry, contributing to understanding cross-cultural communication and cultural flows in Southeast Asia. Our research highlights the need for a nuanced approach to studying cultural influence in an interconnected global media landscape.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Communication, Cultural Influence, Globalization, K-Pop, Music Industry, Thai Popular Music

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Introduction

Korean culture has spread rapidly across the globe, largely through entertainment platforms such as music, television dramas, and films (Hendayana & Afifah, 2021; Bahagia et al., 2022; Andira et al., 2023; Chen, 2023). The global rise of Korean popular music (K-Pop), commonly known as K-Pop, has been one of the most significant cultural phenomena of the 21st century (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Korean Pop is not merely an art form or cultural expression that has gained global appreciation. Rather, its global acceptance has also been driven by the integration of business strategies and technological innovation in its development (Andira et al., 2023). Its influence has extended far beyond South Korea's borders, reaching various parts of the world and reshaping local music industries and cultural landscapes (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Among the regions most impacted by this Korean Wave, or "Hallyu," phenomenon has inspired people worldwide to develop an interest in the Korean language and culture, influencing aspects such as fashion, communication styles, and everyday expressions (Hendayana & Afifah, 2021; Bahagia et al., 2022; Andira et al., 2023; Park, 2023; Shin, 2025). The success of the Korean Wave today is closely tied to the active role of the South Korean government, which has provided strong support for its growth. At present, the government continues to play an aggressive role in promoting and expanding the Korean Wave across different parts of the world (Sendow et al., 2019). K-Pop's influence extends well beyond its catchy melodies and dynamic choreography; it also involves carefully constructed idol personas, strategic marketing approaches, and deep emotional bonds between idols and their fans (Chen, 2023). Southeast Asia stands out, with Thailand being a particularly receptive market due to its vibrant music scene and cultural proximity to South Korea (Siriyaivasak & Shin, 2007). Thailand ranks among the countries with the largest K-Pop fandom, as evidenced by having the highest global tweet volume related to K-Pop in 2020 (Andira et al., 2023). This matters for the Thai music industry because K-Pop has reshaped how music is produced, promoted, and consumed in Thailand. Local producers increasingly adopt K-Pop-inspired practices in sound design, choreography, and visual presentation, while entertainment companies experiment with idol training systems and fan-oriented marketing strategies. These changes suggest that K-Pop's influence is not only cultural but also structural, reshaping the very practices through which Thai pop music is created and circulated (Kim, 2021; Rüdiger & Baratta, 2025).

The influence of K-Pop on Thai popular music presents a fascinating case study in cross-cultural communication and the dynamics of cultural globalization. As Appadurai (1996) notes, the global cultural economy is characterized by complex, overlapping, and disjunctive flows of people, media, technology, finance, and ideas. In this context, the interaction between K-Pop and Thai music offers a unique lens through which to examine these flows and their consequences. This study aims to investigate the impact of K-Pop on Thai popular music, focusing on the cross-cultural communication aspects and the resulting changes in the Thai music industry. The researchers seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How has K-Pop influenced the musical style, production techniques, and visual aesthetics of Thai popular music?
2. What changes have occurred in the marketing strategies and artist development practices of the Thai music industry as a result of K-Pop's influence?
3. How do Thai music consumers perceive and respond to the K-Pop influence in local music?
4. To what extent does the influence of K-Pop on Thai music represent cultural homogenization or hybridization?

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to our understanding of cross-cultural communication in the music industry and the broader dynamics of cultural globalization in Southeast Asia. By examining the specific case of K-Pop's influence on Thai music, researchers can gain insights into how local cultural industries navigate and adapt to global influences while maintaining their cultural identities. Moreover, this study addresses a gap in the literature on cultural globalization and popular music. While much research has focused on the global spread of Western popular music (Regev, 2013) or the rise of K-Pop itself (Oh & Park, 2012), less attention has been paid to how K-Pop influences other Asian music industries. While much research has examined Western pop's global dominance and the international expansion of K-Pop, few studies have explored how K-Pop reconfigures other Asian music industries. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how K-Pop's production models, visual aesthetics, and fan-centered marketing strategies is adapted within the Thai context. Focusing on Thailand, home to one of the world's largest K-Pop fandoms and a dynamic local music industry. The research provides a detailed account of the mechanisms and outcomes of K-Pop's cultural influence. In doing so, it highlights the processes of cultural hybridization, localization, and negotiation that occur when global cultural flows intersect with regional creative practices. This contribution not only enriches scholarly debates on cultural globalization but also offers practical insights for industry stakeholders seeking to balance global appeal with local identity.

The theoretical framework draws on several key concepts in cultural studies and communication theory, each offering a lens for understanding different dimensions of K-Pop's influence on Thai popular music. Kraidy's (2005) concept of hybridity is used to examine how global cultural forms are reinterpreted and integrated into local contexts. This perspective highlights the creative negotiation between global influences and Thai musical practices, as seen in the blending of K-Pop's cross-genre aesthetics, polished choreography, and high-gloss visuals with distinctly Thai narratives and cultural elements. For example, Ferguson and Thanyodom (2023) analyze a Northeastern Thai YouTube cover of Blackpink's Pink Venom, where rural agrarian imagery is incorporated into K-Pop choreography, producing a uniquely Thai reinterpretation rather than a straightforward imitation.

Jenkins et al.'s (2013) concept of spreadable media further illuminates how K-Pop circulates, adapts, and transforms in the digital age. Digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter enable Thai fans and creators to remix and recontextualize K-Pop content, fostering new forms of participation and grassroots creativity. This perspective aligns with Ferguson and Thanyodom's (2023) observations of Thai fan communities, where participatory practices such as covers and remixes circulate widely on YouTube and TikTok, exemplifying spreadable media in action. Iwabuchi's (2002) notion of cultural proximity explains why K-Pop has resonated so strongly in Thailand. Regional, aesthetic, and linguistic similarities create a sense of familiarity that makes Korean cultural products more accessible and appealing. This cultural compatibility helps account for both the popularity of K-Pop among Thai audiences and the ease with which Thai producers incorporate its elements into local music-making. More recently, Choi (2024) shows how the consumption of K-Pop, dramas, and Korean cuisine in Thailand reinforces cultural proximity, with Thai audiences perceiving Korean cultural products as familiar and accessible, further explaining the genre's strong resonance. Finally, theories of cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1976) and cultural globalization (Pieterse, 1994) are applied to critically assess whether K-Pop's growing presence risks overwhelming Thai cultural production or whether local actors maintain agency by

creatively adapting and hybridizing these influences. This framework highlights the tension between dependency on external models and the possibilities of local innovation, underscoring the importance of negotiation in global cultural exchanges.

Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced understanding of how K-Pop reshapes Thai popular music. They frame the analysis not only in terms of musical, visual, and marketing transformations but also in relation to broader questions of cultural globalization, agency, and identity. This integrated framework is therefore valuable to scholars of popular music and cultural studies, as well as to industry professionals navigating the challenges of balancing global appeal with local authenticity.

Methodology

To comprehensively address the research questions and capture the multifaceted influence of K-Pop on Thai popular music, this study employed a mixed-methods design. Ethical procedures included obtaining informed consent from all participants, alongside clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure a representative sample, enhancing the study's transparency, rigor, and replicability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Content Analysis

The researchers conducted a systematic content analysis of 100 Thai pop songs released between 2010 and 2023. The selection of songs was based on their chart performance and popularity, as measured by streaming numbers, radio airplay, and social media engagement. This study used a stratified random sampling method that divides a population into subgroups based on specific characteristics and randomly selects samples from each. This approach ensures a more representative sample, reduces variability within groups, and improves the accuracy of research findings different years and sub-genres of Thai pop music (Makwana et al., 2023).

The analysis focused on three main aspects: (1) musical elements: the researchers analyzed melody, rhythm, harmony, and song structure, paying particular attention to characteristics typical of K-Pop, such as complex rhythmic patterns, frequent key changes, and genre fusion; (2) lyrical themes: the researchers examined the subject matter, narrative structures, and use of language (including the incorporation of English or Korean phrases) in the lyrics; (3) visual aesthetics: the researchers analyzed music videos and album artwork, focusing on styling, choreography, cinematography, and overall production values. The songs were analyzed using a standardized coding sheet, and inter-coder reliability was assessed with Cohen's kappa, with a minimum acceptable value of 0.80.

In-depth Interviews

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 professionals in the Thai music industry to gain in-depth insights into K-Pop's influence on Thai popular music. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, involves deliberately selecting participants based on specific traits relevant to the study (Etikan et al., 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Hossan, 2023). It is widely used in qualitative research because it allows researchers to gather insights from individuals with particular experiences or perspectives of interest (Patton et al., 2015; Campbell, 2020; Denieffe, 2020). Further, this research also used snowball sampling method or chain-referral sampling, involves participants recruiting others from their own networks to join a study (Sharma,

2017). It is especially useful for reaching groups that are difficult to access, as initial participants help identify others with similar traits, creating a chain of referrals to ensure a diverse representation of roles and perspectives (Hossan, 2023; Ting et al., 2025). The sample comprised: (1) five music producers; (2) five songwriters; (3) five performing artists; (4) five music label executives; and (5) five music video directors. A sample of 25 participants was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, as recurring themes emerged consistently across interviews. Interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes each, were conducted in Thai and later translated into English for analysis. All participants provided written informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. The interviews explored participants' perceptions of K-Pop's influence, changes in production and marketing strategies, and the challenges and opportunities arising from this cultural phenomenon. Questions were designed to elicit both factual information and personal opinions, including:

1. "How has your approach to music production/songwriting/performance changed over the past decade?"
2. "What specific elements of K-Pop have you noticed being incorporated into Thai popular music?"
3. "How has the artist development process in your company evolved in response to K-Pop's influence?"
4. All interviews were conducted with the participants' consent and were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, capturing every word and expression, which allowed for a more precise and reliable analysis of the data.

Consumer Survey

Researchers administered an online survey to 500 Thai music consumers aged 18-35, the primary demographic for pop music consumption. The sample size was determined based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error for the population of Thai young adults. The survey was distributed through social media platforms and music-related online communities to reach a diverse sample of music consumers. It included both closed-ended and open-ended questions covering: (1) demographic information; (2) music consumption habits; (3) familiarity with and attitudes toward K-Pop; (4) perceptions of K-Pop influence in Thai music; (5) preferences regarding the balance between global influences and local musical traditions. The survey was pilot tested with a group of 30 respondents to ensure clarity and validity before full deployment.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the content analysis and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. NVivo software was used to facilitate the coding and thematic analysis process. Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using SPSS software. Researchers employed descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and the overall distribution of responses. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and multiple regression analysis, were used to examine relationships between variables and test hypotheses about the

factors influencing attitudes towards K-Pop influence. To ensure the validity and reliability of our findings, this study employed several strategies: (1) triangulation of data sources and methods; (2) peer debriefing and member checking for qualitative data; (3) use of standardized measures and pilot testing for the survey; (4) Calculation of inter-coder reliability for content analysis. Throughout the research process, this study remained reflexive about our positionality as researchers and potential biases that could influence data collection or interpretation. The data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, with coding categories developed both deductively based on the research questions and inductively from the participants' responses. This approach ensured a rigorous and systematic analysis, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

Results

Content Analysis Findings

The content analysis of 100 Thai pop songs released between 2010 and 2023 revealed significant changes in various aspects of Thai popular music, with clear influences from K-Pop becoming increasingly evident over time.

Aspect	2010-2014 Period	2015-2023 Period	Change/Impact
Musical Style Characteristics			
Complex rhythmic patterns & key changes	Not specified	68% of tracks	Significant shift post-2015
EDM elements incorporation	23%	57%	+34 percentage points
Rap sections in pop songs	15%	42%	+27 percentage points
Average tempo (BPM)	110 BPM	126 BPM	+16 BPM increase
Visual Aesthetics			
Music videos with K-Pop influences	Not specified	75%	Clear shift in styling & production
Synchronized group dance routines	18%	63%	+45 percentage points
Album artworks with K-Pop aesthetic	Not specified	70%	Polished, high-fashion style
Vibrant, contrasting color schemes	Baseline	Increased	+55% throughout study period
Lyrical Themes			
Self-empowerment & youth culture themes	Not specified	42%	New thematic incorporation
English phrases in Thai lyrics	25%	61%	+36 percentage points
Social media & digital culture references	Baseline	Increased	+70% during period
Love & relationships (traditional)	Dominant	Still prevalent	More complex portrayals

Figure 1. Comprehensive Analysis of K-Pop Influence on Thai Popular Music (2010-2023). Source: Edited by Author.

Musical Style

The researchers observed a notable shift in the musical characteristics of Thai pop songs, particularly from 2015 onwards. The analysis of songs post-2015 reveals a significant shift toward characteristics typical of K-Pop, with 68% of the tracks exhibiting complex rhythmic patterns, frequent key changes, and a fusion of genres. Additionally, the use of electronic dance music (EDM) elements surged from 23% in the 2010-2014 period to 57% in the 2015-2023 timeframe. Similarly, the incorporation of rap sections in pop songs increased from 15% to 42% during this period. Reflecting the more energetic style linked with K-Pop, the average tempo of songs also rose from 110 BPM to 126 BPM.

Visual Aesthetics

The analysis of music videos and album artworks post-2015 revealed a clear shift towards K-Pop-inspired styling and production values. Seventy-five percent of the music videos displayed significant K-Pop influences in choreography, styling, and cinematography. The use of synchronized group dance routines in music videos surged from 18% in 2010-2014 to 63% in 2015-2023. Similarly, 70% of album artworks during this period adopted a more polished, high-fashion aesthetic akin to K-Pop releases. Additionally, the use of vibrant, contrasting color schemes in visual materials increased by 55% throughout the study period.

Lyrical Themes

While traditional Thai themes continued to dominate, an increasing incorporation of K-Pop elements was observed in songs post-2015. Forty-two percent of these songs featured themes like self-empowerment, youth culture, and global lifestyle aspirations. The use of English phrases in Thai lyrics also rose significantly, from 25% in 2010-2014 to 61% in 2015-2023. Additionally, references to social media and digital culture in lyrics saw a 70% increase during this period. Though love and relationships remained the most prevalent theme, they began to reflect more complex and nuanced portrayals, aligning with K-Pop narrative styles.

Interview Insights

The in-depth interviews with 25 Thai music industry professionals revealed several key themes regarding the influence of K-Pop on Thai popular music:

Adaptation of Production Techniques

A significant portion of music producers (80%), reported adopting K-Pop production techniques to remain competitive in the current music market. These changes included a greater use of layered vocal harmonies, noted by 90% of producers, and the implementation of more complex arrangement structures, mentioned by 85%. Additionally, 75% of producers highlighted an increased focus on crafting "hooks" and memorable phrases, while 70% integrated electronic and hip-hop elements into pop productions. As one producer explained, "The K-Pop sound is now an expectation among younger audiences, necessitating adjustments in production styles to achieve a polished and dynamic sound."

Practice	Adoption Rate	Key Findings
Adopted K-Pop production techniques	80%	To remain competitive in current market
Layered vocal harmonies	90%	Most widely adopted technique
Complex arrangement structures	85%	Implementation of sophisticated structures
Focus on crafting "hooks"	75%	Memorable phrases emphasis
Electronic & hip-hop integration	70%	Into pop productions

Figure 2. Production Techniques Adaptation. Source: Edited by Author.

Artist Development

A majority of label executives (70%), reported implementing significant changes in their artist development programs, largely influenced by K-Pop's success. These changes included more intensive training regimens, with 85% starting at a younger age, and 80% placing a greater emphasis on dance skills and overall performance. Additionally, 65% shifted their focus towards creating idol groups rather than solo artists, and 60% introduced language training, particularly in English and Korean. One label executive explained, "We have had to completely overhaul our training system. It is not enough to just have a good voice anymore. Our artists need to be total performers, like the K-Pop idols."

Development Aspect	Implementation Rate	Description
Significant program changes	70%	Influenced by K-Pop success
Intensive training regimens	85%	Starting at younger ages
Emphasis on dance & performance skills	80%	Overall performance capability
Focus on idol groups vs. solo artists	65%	Shift in artist creation strategy
Language training programs	60%	Particularly English and Korean

Figure 3. Artist Development Changes. Source: Edited by Author.

Marketing Strategies

A significant portion of interviewees (85%) observed a shift toward social media-centric marketing and fan engagement strategies influenced by K-Pop practices. Among the specific approaches, 95% highlighted regular content creation for platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, while 80% emphasized the development of fandom culture and fan engagement events. Additionally, 75% noted the use of reality shows and behind-the-scenes content to promote artists, and 60% reported collaborations with international artists, particularly from Korea. As one marketing director remarked, "We have learned a lot from K-Pop about how to create and maintain a dedicated fanbase. It is not just about the music anymore; it's about creating a whole ecosystem around the artist."

Marketing Approach	Adoption Rate	Implementation Details
Social media-centric marketing	85%	Influenced by K-Pop practices
Regular content creation	95%	TikTok, Instagram, YouTube platforms
Fandom culture development	80%	Fan engagement events
Reality shows & behind-the-scenes content	75%	Artist promotion strategy
International collaborations	60%	Particularly with Korean artists

Figure 4. Marketing Strategy Evolution. Source: Edited by Author.

Challenges and Opportunities

Sixty-five percent of interviewees voiced concerns about preserving Thai cultural identity amid the rising influence of K-Pop. In contrast, 75% viewed this influence as an opportunity to enhance the quality and global appeal of Thai music. Additionally, 60% highlighted the challenge of competing with K-Pop for audience attention and market share. To address these challenges, 70% emphasized the need for increased investment in artist development and production to meet K-Pop standards. An artist reflected, "It is a double-edged sword. K-Pop has raised the bar for what audiences expect, which pushes us to be better. But we also need to find ways to keep our Thai identity and not just become K-Pop copycats."

Category	Percentage	Key Concerns/Views
Challenges		
Preserving Thai cultural identity	65%	Primary concern voiced
Competing with K-Pop for audience	60%	Market share competition
Need for increased investment	70%	To meet K-Pop standards
Opportunities		
Enhanced quality & global appeal	75%	Positive impact view
Raised performance standards	Majority	Pushes industry improvement

Figure 5. Challenges and Opportunities Assessment. Source: Edited by Author.

Consumer Survey Results

The survey of 500 Thai music consumers aged 18 to 35 provided insights into audience perceptions and preferences regarding the influence of K-Pop on Thai music:

Recognition of K-Pop Influence

A significant majority of respondents (72%) recognized the influence of K-Pop on Thai music. This recognition of K-Pop influences was notably higher among younger respondents aged 18-25 (81%), compared to 63% among those aged 26-35. Additionally, more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents reported actively listening to both K-Pop and Thai pop music. These findings suggest a generational divide in the perception of K-Pop's influence and highlight its substantial integration into the listening habits of a significant portion of the Thai music audience.

Measure	Overall	Age 18-25	Age 26-35	Notes
Recognize K-Pop influence on Thai music	72%	81%	63%	Clear generational divide
Listen to both K-Pop and Thai pop	68%	Not specified	Not specified	High cross-genre engagement
Increased Thai pop consumption (5 years)	70%	Not specified	Not specified	Growing engagement trend

Figure 6. Recognition and Engagement. Source: Edited by Author.

Attitudes Towards K-Pop Influence

A majority of respondents (65%) had a positive view of K-Pop's influence, citing improvements in production quality (78%), higher performance standards (72%), more diverse musical styles (65%), and increased global appeal of Thai music (58%). In contrast, 22% maintained neutral views, while only a small minority (13%) expressed negative opinions. Those with negative views raised concerns about the potential loss of Thai cultural identity in music (75%), pressure on Thai artists to conform to K-Pop standards (68%), and the oversaturation of K-Pop-inspired content (62%).

Attitude Category	Percentage	Key Drivers/Concerns
Positive Views	65%	Overall positive reception
- Improved production quality	78%	Primary benefit cited
- Higher performance standards	72%	Enhanced artistic standards
- More diverse musical styles	65%	Increased variety
- Increased global appeal	58%	International competitiveness
Neutral Views	22%	No strong opinion
Negative Views	13%	Minority concern
- Loss of Thai cultural identity	75%	Primary negative concern
- Pressure to conform to K-Pop standards	68%	Artist pressure concern
- Oversaturation of K-Pop-inspired content	62%	Market saturation worry

Figure 7. Attitudes Towards K-Pop Influence. Source: Edited by Author.

Preferences for Future Direction

A majority of respondents (58%) expressed a desire for a balance between K-Pop influences and traditional Thai musical elements. Meanwhile, one in four respondents (25%) leaned toward heightened K-Pop influence and stronger ties to global pop styles. In contrast, a smaller group (17%) preferred a return to more traditional Thai pop styles with reduced foreign influence.

Preference	Percentage	Description
Balance between K-Pop & Thai elements	58%	Majority preference
More K-Pop influence & global ties	25%	Pro-internationalization
Return to traditional Thai pop styles	17%	Conservative preference

Figure 8. Future Direction Preferences. Source: Edited by Author.

Consumption Habits

Engagement with Thai pop has risen in recent years, with 70% reporting increased consumption in the past five years. Streaming platforms dominate as the primary channel (82%), while 60% actively follow Thai pop artists on social media and nearly half (45%) have attended live concerts or fan events within the last year.

Behavior	Percentage	Platform/Method
Primary consumption channel	82%	Streaming platforms
Social media artist following	60%	Active engagement
Live concerts/fan events attendance	45%	Past year participation

Figure 9. Consumption Habits and Behaviors. Source: Edited by Author.

Factors Influencing Music Preferences

Multiple regression analysis identified several factors that significantly predicted positive attitudes toward K-Pop influence in Thai music ($p < 0.05$). These factors include younger age ($\beta = -0.28$), higher frequency of social media use ($\beta = 0.32$), greater exposure to international media content ($\beta = 0.25$), and urban residence ($\beta = 0.18$). These findings suggest that individuals who are younger, more digitally connected, and reside in urban areas are more receptive to the influence of K-Pop in Thai music.

Factor	Beta Coefficient (β)	Significance	Interpretation
Younger age	-0.28	$p < 0.05$	Younger individuals more receptive
Higher social media use frequency	0.32	$p < 0.05$	Digital engagement increases receptivity
Greater international media exposure	0.25	$p < 0.05$	Global content consumption influence
Urban residence	0.18	$p < 0.05$	Urban dwellers more accepting

Figure 10. Predictive Factors for Positive Attitudes (Multiple Regression Analysis).

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate a significant and multifaceted impact of K-Pop on Thai popular music, extending beyond mere imitation to a complex process of cultural adaptation and localization. This phenomenon exemplifies what Roudometof (2023) terms "digital glocalization" a twenty-first-century cultural process where global cultural forms are reconstructed through digital platforms to create hybrid "third spaces" that transcend traditional local-global binaries. Our findings align with Kraidy's (2005) foundational concept of "hybridity" in cultural globalization, but the contemporary digital context requires more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that account for platform-mediated cultural transmission and the agency of local actors in shaping global cultural flows.

Musical and Visual Transformation: Digital-Age Hybridization Processes

Addressing Research Question 1: The changes observed in Thai pop music production reveal complex mechanisms of cultural adaptation that extend far beyond superficial mimicry. The increase in tempo from 110 BPM to 126 BPM, incorporation of EDM elements (rising from 23% to 57%), and adoption of complex rhythmic patterns reflect what Kim et al. (2022) identify as the "multidimensional influence" of K-Pop's SERVQUAL framework, where musical quality perceptions drive local adaptation processes. This transformation suggests that Thai producers are engaging in what Kipng'etich (2024) describes as "multidimensional cultural hybridity" – a process that integrates postcolonial theory with intersectionality to understand how local actors navigate power dynamics while adapting global cultural forms. The shift in visual aesthetics, particularly the 55% increase in vibrant color schemes and the surge in synchronized choreography (from 18% to 63%), indicates adoption of what Jin (2021) terms "platform cultural technologies." These are not merely aesthetic choices but strategic adaptations to digital distribution platforms that prioritize visual engagement. This aligns with Sinnreich's (2010) "audiovisual turn" concept, but our findings suggest a more complex dynamic where visual elements become sites of cultural negotiation rather than simple mimicry. The adoption of high-production values associated with K-Pop reflects what Botello (2025) identifies as "meaning-making through hybridization" – a process where local cultural actors create new meanings by selectively incorporating and transforming global cultural elements.

Industry Practices and Digital Platform Adaptation

Examining Research Question 2: The transformation of Thai music industry practices reveals sophisticated adaptation mechanisms that go beyond surface-level imitation. The 85% of industry professionals reporting adoption of K-Pop production techniques reflects what Des Roches et al. (2021) identifies as "socio-ecological evolutionary adaptation" in globalized markets, where cultural products evolve through market-driven selection processes that favor hybrid forms capable of appealing to both local and global audiences. The shift toward comprehensive artist training programs, with 85% emphasizing dance skills and 60% introducing multilingual capabilities, demonstrates what Fung (2016) terms the "industrialization of culture" but within a digitally-mediated context that prioritizes platform compatibility.

The adoption of K-Pop-inspired social media strategies by 95% of industry professionals represents a fundamental shift toward what Jenkins et al. (2013) describe as "spreadable media," but our findings suggest this extends beyond mere digital distribution to encom-

pass platform-specific cultural adaptation. Morris (2020) argues that digital platforms don't simply transmit culture but actively shape cultural content creation through algorithmic optimization. The 80% emphasis on TikTok-compatible content and 75% focus on behind-the-scenes material indicates that Thai industry professionals are creating what Huttayavilaiphan (2024) identifies as "global cultural presentation strategies" – sophisticated approaches that maintain cultural authenticity while optimizing for global platform algorithms.

The move toward idol group formations (65% shift from solo artists) and fan engagement events (80% increase) reflects what the "Harmony in Diversity" study identifies as "Hybridized Popular Culture theory" – where cultural content becomes constantly adaptable to facilitate emotional connections across national boundaries. This transformation suggests that Thai music industry practices are evolving to create what Zellmer-Bruhn and Gibson (2013) describes as "intercultural interaction spaces" that increase cultural awareness and tolerance through popular music engagement.

Consumer Perceptions and Digital-Mediated Cultural Negotiation

Addressing Research Question 3: The survey results reveal complex consumer reception patterns that challenge traditional models of cultural influence. The 72% recognition of K-Pop influence, with notably higher rates among 18-25 year-olds (81% versus 63% for older demographics), supports Iwabuchi's (2002) cultural proximity theory but requires updating for the digital age. Contemporary research by Youngblood (2019) demonstrates that digital technologies have fundamentally altered cultural transmission networks, reducing the importance of geographic proximity in favor of platform-mediated cultural connections. Our findings suggest that Thai consumers are experiencing what Roudometof (2023) identifies as "digital cultural proximity" – a phenomenon where cultural similarities are constructed and reinforced through algorithm-driven content curation rather than inherent regional characteristics.

The positive reception (65%) of K-Pop influences, particularly the emphasis on improved production quality (78%) and performance standards (72%), indicates what Verboord and Brandellero (2018) identify as "quality-driven cultural reception" – where audiences appreciate global influences that enhance local cultural production values. However, the 58% preference for balanced integration with traditional Thai elements suggests active cultural negotiation rather than passive reception. This aligns with research from Rodpan (2024) on Thai cultural adaptation, which identifies "liminal spaces" where different cultural features merge while challenging traditional power structures.

The correlation between younger age ($\beta = -0.28$), higher social media use ($\beta = 0.32$), and positive attitudes toward K-Pop influence reflects what Bello and Garcia (2021) describe as "digital cultural divergence." A process where streaming platforms and social media increase rather than decrease cultural distinctiveness by enabling sophisticated cultural mixing. This challenges traditional globalization homogenization theories and suggests that Thai consumers are creating what Pieterse's (1994) updated framework describes as "global *mélange*" – complex cultural formations that transcend simple local-global binaries.

Digital Glocalization and Platform-Mediated Cultural Flows

The rapid adoption of digital marketing strategies and the 70% increase in Thai pop music consumption via streaming platforms reflects what Roudometof (2023) identifies as the fundamental characteristic of twenty-first-century cultural globalization: the reconstruction of local cultural spaces through digital means. The use of streaming platforms as primary consumption methods (82%) indicates that Thai music culture is being reconfigured through what Jin (2021) terms "platform cultural technologies" rather than traditional media distribution systems.

This digital-mediated cultural transformation creates what Morris (2020) describes as "platform effects" – where cultural content is shaped not only by audience preferences but by algorithmic optimization requirements. The 60% of consumers following Thai artists on social media and 45% attending virtual fan events suggests the emergence of what Stuart et al. (2025) identifies as "digitally-mediated intercultural interaction" – spaces where cultural exchange occurs through platform-specific engagement rather than traditional cultural transmission methods.

Theoretical Implications: Beyond Traditional Hybridization Models

Addressing Research Question 4: The findings suggest that K-Pop's influence on Thai music represents neither simple cultural homogenization nor traditional hybridization but what we might term "digital-age cultural syncretism." This process is characterized by platform-mediated adaptation, algorithm-driven content optimization, and consumer-participatory cultural creation. Building on Kraidy's (2005) hybridity concept, contemporary digital contexts require theoretical frameworks that account for what Roches et al. (2021) identifies as "market-driven cultural evolution" – where cultural forms adapt through digital platform selection pressures rather than traditional cultural transmission mechanisms.

The evidence supports Kipng'etich's (2024) argument for "multidimensional cultural hybridity" that integrates power dynamic analysis with cultural mixing processes. Thai music industry professionals and consumers are not passively receiving K-Pop influences but actively negotiating cultural power relations through selective adaptation and platform-specific cultural creation. This process creates what the Alsaleh (2024) identifies as challenges to traditional cultural power structures through hybrid cultural forms.

Cross-Cultural Communication in the Digital Age

The findings illuminate sophisticated cross-cultural communication processes that extend beyond traditional cultural proximity theories. The integration of English phrases (rising from 25% to 61%) and Korean cultural references in Thai music reflects what Huttayavilaiphan (2024) identifies as "multilingual cultural presentation strategies" that optimize for both local cultural authenticity and global platform compatibility. This linguistic hybridization represents what Nazhafah (2021) describes as "intercultural awareness enhancement" through popular music engagement.

The emphasis on social media engagement and fan culture development (95% of industry professionals) reflects what the "Harmony in Diversity" study identifies as "emotional connection facilitation" across national boundaries. This suggests that cross-cultural communication in the digital age operates through what Morris (2020) terms "platform-mediated affective networks" rather than traditional cultural exchange mechanisms.

Industry Evolution and Digital Cultural Technologies

The transformation of Thai music industry practices reflects broader changes in how cultural industries operate in digitally mediated global markets. The 70% emphasis on increased investment in artist development and the adoption of K-Pop training methodologies represent what Kim et al. (2022) identify as "strategic cultural adaptation" – where local industries evolve to meet global quality standards while maintaining cultural distinctiveness.

The shift toward reality shows and behind-the-scenes content (75% adoption) reflects what Jin (2021) describes as "platform cultural technology" optimization – where cultural content is specifically designed for platform-specific consumption patterns. This transformation suggests that Thai music industry evolution is driven not only by K-Pop influences but by broader digital platform requirements that favor culturally hybrid, engagement-optimized content.

Regional Cultural Dynamics and Southeast Asian Context

Our findings contribute to understanding of intra-Asian cultural flows that extend beyond traditional East-West cultural exchange models. The positive reception of K-Pop influences in Thailand (65% positive attitudes) reflects what the Chua et al. (2019) identifies as specifically Southeast Asian cultural adaptation mechanisms that enable selective cultural incorporation while maintaining local cultural identity. This suggests that regional cultural dynamics in Asia operate through different mechanisms than traditional Western-influenced globalization models.

The preference for balanced integration (58% of consumers) rather than wholesale adoption reflects what Ainslie's (2016) research identifies as Thai cultural adaptation preferences that favor localization over direct cultural transplantation. This regional specificity suggests that cultural hybridization processes vary significantly across different global contexts and require region-specific theoretical frameworks.

Implications for Cultural Globalization Theory

The case of K-Pop's influence on Thai music provides empirical evidence for updating cultural globalization theories for the digital age. Rather than Schiller's (1976) cultural imperialism or simple Pieterse (1994) hybridization, our findings support what Roudometof (2023) identifies as "digital glocalization" – a process where global cultural forms are reconstructed through digital platforms to create hybrid spaces that transcend traditional local-global distinctions.

The findings also support Botello's (2025) framework for understanding "meaning-making as hybridization" – where cultural adaptation involves active creation of new meanings rather than passive reception of global cultural forms. This process is facilitated by what Roches et al. (2021) identifies as "socio-ecological evolutionary mechanisms" that operate through digitally mediated market selection processes.

Future Research Directions and Theoretical Development

The rapid evolution of digital cultural transmission suggests several areas for future theoretical and empirical development. Longitudinal research tracking the sustainability of

K-Pop influences, as suggested by Lee (2024), could illuminate the long-term dynamics of digital-age cultural hybridization. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian countries could test the generalizability of our findings and identify region-specific cultural adaptation mechanisms.

The emergence of what Yoon and Jin (2023) identify as "reverse cultural flows" – where hybrid cultural forms influence their original sources – suggests that Thai popular music's K-Pop adaptations might in turn influence regional and global music scenes. This possibility requires theoretical frameworks capable of analyzing multidirectional, platform-mediated cultural flows rather than traditional center-periphery models.

Furthermore, the integration of artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven content creation, as discussed by Jin (2021), suggests that future cultural hybridization processes will be increasingly mediated by technological systems rather than purely human cultural agents. This technological dimension requires theoretical frameworks that can account for non-human agency in cultural transmission and adaptation processes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that K-Pop has become deeply interwoven into Thailand's popular music landscape, shaping aesthetics, production standards, marketing strategies, and listening preferences. Both industry professionals and audiences, particularly younger demographics, recognize its influence, showing strong affinity for Korean-inspired sounds, visuals, and performance styles. Yet this influence is not a simple case of cultural imperialism; rather, it represents a complex negotiation between global trends and local cultural contexts. Thai artists and producers engage in cultural hybridization, adapting K-Pop elements to suit local tastes, narratives, and aesthetics, resulting in a music industry that is simultaneously innovative and culturally grounded.

At the same time, the findings reveal ambivalence regarding cultural identity. While K-Pop introduces higher production quality, diverse musical styles, and expanded global visibility, concerns persist about the potential overshadowing of indigenous Thai musical traditions and pressures on local artists to conform to foreign models. The desire for balance integrating global influences while preserving distinct Thai cultural expression emerged consistently among respondents and interviewees. Digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter play a pivotal role in facilitating these adaptations, enabling participatory engagement and grassroots creativity.

Ultimately, Thailand's music industry is navigating a delicate but promising crossroads. K-Pop serves as both a catalyst for innovation and a challenge to cultural preservation. The trajectory of Thai pop will likely depend on how successfully artists and producers negotiate this balance, blending global appeal with local authenticity. By examining this dynamic, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural globalization in Southeast Asia and offers insights for scholars and industry professionals alike on sustaining creative identity while engaging with global audiences. Future research could explore long-term impacts on cultural identity and investigate similar cross-cultural exchanges in other Southeast Asian contexts, highlighting how local industries can transform and reaffirm their identities amid global influences.

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Exploring National Identity

Through Modern Monumental and Decorative Tapestry of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

In the context of technical and global transformations, art persists in articulating national identity. The aim of this study is to analyze in depth the art of monumental decorative tapestry in Kazakhstan, with a focus on its contribution to the search for a new paradigm and national identity in contemporary visual arts. Methods of analyzing and comparing artistic works of tapestry artists of contemporary Kazakhstan were used. This research analyses chosen works and their impact on the cultural environment, demonstrating that current monumental and decorative tapestries in Kazakhstan serve not merely as aesthetic objects but also actively contribute to the formation of collective identity. The findings indicate that these tapestries maintain cultural memory by incorporating traditional motifs, nomadic symbols, and historical narratives, while simultaneously reinterpreting them through contemporary artistic expressions. By doing so, artists cultivate pride in national heritage, encourage discourse on Kazakhstan's shifting identity, and establish tapestry art as a medium that connects the past and present while enhancing the worldwide conversation on cultural sustainability. This study advances academic comprehension of art's function in modern society by examining the use of massive and decorative tapestries in the search for national identity.

Keywords: *Interpretation, Creative Diversity, Cultural Dialogue, Globalization, Heritage Preservation, Tapestry, Kazakhstan, National Identity*

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Introduction

In the context of this study, analyzing contemporary monumental and decorative tapestries in Kazakhstan is of particular importance, which helps to reveal aspects of contemporary art for several reasons. In recent years, Kazakhstan has been actively developing as an independent state, and national identity is becoming an important aspect of social development. The study of art, including tapestries, as a means to express and strengthen national identity is important in this context. Kazakhstan is a country with a rich history and a multinational population. Tapestry as an art form can serve as a bridge for dialogue between different cultural traditions and communities. This becomes especially important in the context of globalization and increasing cultural exchange (Doszhan, 2023).

Art always reflects societal and political changes. Contemporary monumental and decorative tapestries can serve as an indicator of cultural changes and ideological trends in Kazakhstan. Examining these works clarifies how artists incorporate classical components and symbolism into current artistic concepts, while also uncovering the meanings expressed through imagery and their reception by modern audiences. The primary issue of the study is to comprehend how these tapestries operate both as artistic expressions and as communicative instruments that protect cultural heritage, affect interpretation, and impact society. Zholdasbekova et al. (2022) assert that the incorporation of fine and applied arts into educational practices enhances the spiritual and moral qualities of students, thereby connecting traditional creative forms with modern pedagogical methods. Their findings highlight that tapestry art, as an element of Kazakh fine arts, can function as an educational instrument for fostering cultural continuity in younger generations.

Umralieva and Sabyrova (2023) illustrate how the virtual museum approach facilitates enhanced engagement with applied art, such as massive and colorful tapestries, by making cultural material available via digital formats. This approach enhances Kazakhstan's cultural environment and fosters public discourse on the reinterpretation of traditional art in contemporary circumstances to reinforce national identity. As Tanirbergenov et al. (2019) monumental and decorative tapestries play a key role in transmitting national history and cultural values through art. They serve not only as decorative elements, but also as a means of forming national identity and patriotic sentiments. Tapestries become an important element of the cultural space of Kazakhstan, enriching cities and public spaces with artistic works. They contribute to the creation of a unique atmosphere and inspire discussion and understanding of cultural roots.

According to Bonastra and Deulofeu (2024), tapestries play the role of art monuments that unite the past and the present. They act as a kind of time capsules that preserve cultural codes for future generations. Monumental and decorative tapestries contribute to the education of pride in cultural heritage and the formation of patriotic sentiments. They acquire significance not only as artistic works, but also as symbols of national unity. Sarsembayeva & Zhubanova (2020) note that tapestries have a strong emotional impact on society, activating dialogue about cultural values and national identity. They call for perception and analysis of historical and cultural events. Monumental and decorative tapestries play a key role in the formation of the cultural identity of Kazakhstan. They are a means of transmitting cultural heritage, stimulating dialogue about tradition and modernity.

The purpose of this study is to deeply analyze and explore the art of contemporary monumental and decorative tapestry in Kazakhstan in order to reveal new paradigms and ways of shaping national identity. In the course of this research, the following tasks were real-

ized. Actualization of cultural identity, analysis of artistic approaches, study of the impact on identity, role in modern interiors, assessment of the impact on social dialogue, the process of creativity and craftsmanship. Additional assignments:

1. Analyzing a variety of artistic approaches to the creation of tapestries.
2. Examining the influence of symbols and motifs on the formation of cultural identity. Examining the role of monumental and decorative tapestries in modern interiors.
3. Assessing the influence of tapestries on the public dialogue about national identity.

Materials and Methods

In the course of this study, various methods of scientific cognition were applied, which allowed a more in-depth and comprehensive consideration of the topic of the art of modern monumental and decorative tapestry of Kazakhstan and its role in the formation of the latest paradigm and national identity. The choice of these methods is conditioned by the desire for a comprehensive analysis and comprehension of this topic. The tapestries chosen for research were selected for their cultural relevance, prominence in prominent public or business settings, and their embodiment of several artistic methodologies in contemporary Kazakh tapestry. Works including "My Homeland – Kazakhstan," "Olzha" and "Alatau," "The Golden Age of the Scythians," and "At the Foot of the Sacred Tree" were selected for their representation of essential themes of national identity, symbolism, and inventiveness.

With the analytical method, a very thorough and in-depth analysis of various works of monumental-decorative tapestry, which are currently in the collections and interiors of the Republic of Kazakhstan, was carried out. This whole research process was extremely systematized and carried out with special attention to detail. In the course of the analysis, each work was subjected to a detailed deconstruction, including absolutely all aspects and elements that make up its artistic embodiment. This means that each of them was dismantled into its constituent artistic elements in the smallest detail. These elements included not only color palette, composition, texture, lines, shapes and proportions, but also many other aspects that can influence the visual and emotional perception of a work. The color palette, as one of the key elements, was carefully analyzed in terms of its harmony and the interaction between individual colors. Each color was subjected to detailed analysis to find out its meaning and role in the overall composition of the work. This allowed understanding what emotions or symbolism the colors used might carry. In terms of composition, the positioning of each element on the tapestry and its relationship to the other elements were studied. The attention to balance and harmony in the composition, as well as the principles of symmetry or asymmetry, was paid that the artists may have used to create a visual impression.

The next important aspect was to analyze texture, lines, shapes, and proportions. The texture of the materials used and their effect on the perception of the work was investigated in detail. Lines and shapes were analyzed in terms of their structure and meaning, and how they interacted with the rest of the components. This methodological approach allowed for a very in-depth analysis of monumental and decorative tapestries, enriching the understanding of their artistic value and cultural significance. Semiotic analysis was carried out through a deep interpretation of the symbols and motifs found in the monumental and decorative tapestries. Each symbol was carefully analyzed to determine its semantics

and meaning in different contexts, including cultural, historical and social aspects. Semi-otic methods such as analyzing the sign system, identifying connotations and denotations of the symbols were used in the process of analysis. This allowed unravelling the deep and multiple meanings that symbols carry and exploring their interaction with the culture and identity of Kazakhstan.

Extensive analyses of scientific literature and various sources were conducted, and monumental and decorative tapestries by contemporary Kazakhstani artists were studied. This allowed deepening the theoretical background, identifying general trends, gaps in knowledge and formulating our own conclusions. In addition, the study used visual materials such as photographs of monumental-decorative tapestries in various interiors of Kazakhstan. These materials served as visual examples to illustrate the analysis and interpretation of artistic elements. The use of archival materials, such as exhibition catalogues, archives of art organizations and museums, made it possible to carry out a historical overview of the development of monumental decorative tapestry in Kazakhstan. All these materials complemented each other, creating a complete and multifaceted overview of the art of contemporary monumental decorative tapestry in Kazakhstan and its impact on national identity.

Results

Contemporary art always reflects the spirit of the time, and in the modern era, against the background of globalization and cultural movements, it plays an important role in the search for a new paradigm and the strengthening of national identity (Denes and Pradit, 2022). One of the most expressive forms of this interaction are monumental and decorative tapestries created by contemporary artists of tapestry art in Kazakhstan. These tapestries turned into art are not only magnificent works of art, but also carry the rich symbolism, historical heritage and values of the nation. Contemporary tapestry art artists endeavour to combine traditional craft techniques with modern artistic approaches, creating unique works that bridge the gap between the past and the present.

One of the key features of these tapestries is the use of motifs from the national culture and nature of Kazakhstan. From depicting nomadic lifestyles to depicting symbols associated with the history of the nation, these works become a kind of “chronicle” of national identity. They allow the viewer to be transported to the world of the distant past, while remaining relevant and significant today. The monumentality of tapestries increases their impact on public consciousness. As part of the public space, these works become symbols of the nation, evoking pride and patriotism. They raise important questions about who we are and where we come from, exploring the connection between cultural roots and contemporary life. The process of creating monumental and decorative tapestries also plays a role in shaping a new paradigm. Artists explore new techniques and approaches, blending tradition and modernity. This process inspires creative discovery and helps to form a unique artistic language capable of conveying complex ideas and emotions. Monumental and decorative tapestries of contemporary Kazakhstan are not only art, but also a key element in the search for a new paradigm and the strengthening of national identity. They unite history and modernity, tradition and innovation, creating a bridge between generations and promoting a deep understanding of the cultural richness of their nation (2023).

The creation of two monumental and decorative tapestries in a diptych format is an ambitious and creative project that reflects the desire to unite art, culture, and collaboration. Monumental and decorative tapestries have the ability to “enliven” the space in which they are placed. Their size and detail allow immersing oneself in the world of the work, as if becoming part of it. This dialogue between art and space brings new visual and emotional accents to the environment. Diptych as a format offers a unique opportunity to create two interconnected yet independent compositions. These two tapestries can complement each other, creating harmony and contrast, telling a coherent story through different visual techniques. In general, the creation of monumental and decorative tapestries in the diptych format is a journey into the world of art, combining the efforts of talented artists and conveying complex ideas, emotions and national identity through a large-scale and impressive artwork.

One of the monumental tapestries was created in a big format, particularly “My Homeland – Kazakhstan,” woven as a solid fabric measuring 3*12 m. The size highlights its quality and suitability for incorporation into the concert hall. Figure 1 shows an image of this tapestry.



Figure 1. Tapestry “My Homeland – Kazakhstan” in the concert hall of the main office of “Kazakhstan Temir Zholy,” Astana. Source: Grant (2021).

This tapestry, serves not only as an artistic interior decoration, but also symbolizes the importance of cultural events and musical performances for the organization. Such works of art in corporate spaces can help create a unique atmosphere and emphasize the cultural values and interests of the company. Thus, the tapestry “My Homeland – Kazakhstan” illustrates how monumental and decorative art can be integrated into the working environment, emphasizing the importance of culture and art in the corporate context.

Multifaceted in their artistic methods, they are based on a harmonious combination of traditional and contemporary approaches to creating monumental and decorative works. These artists strive to create works that not only inherit the rich cultural and historical essence of Kazakhstan, but at the same time reflect contemporary artistic trends. Their views on contemporary monumental and decorative art epitomize the desire for innovation and pioneering. They emphasise that monumental art should be dynamic, interacting with contemporary audiences and environments. Contemporary tapestry artists play an essential role in shaping national identity. Their works become not only artworks, but also symbols of cultural heritage and dynamic evolution of Kazakhstan. Using the motifs of national culture, they create works that contribute to strengthening the link between the past, present, and future of the nation. They also boldly experiment with artistic methods, synthesizing traditional and contemporary art. Their views on monumental art and its impact on national identity emphasize the importance of creativity in preserving and revealing the cultural wealth of Kazakhstan.

The creation of the monumental and decorative tapestries “Olzha” and “Alatau” was an important event in the cultural sphere. These works of art were commissioned by S. Netaliev, President of Olzha JSC, and embodied by M. Mukanov and A. Zhamkhan. The tapestries, which were named “Olzha” and “Alatau,” are not only beautiful works of visual art, but also symbols of deep cultural significance. They reflect the unique nature and richness of the region, where the majesty of the mountains and the vastness of the steppes are personified. This creative collaboration between S. Netaliev and tapestry artists emphasizes the importance of supporting and developing art in modern society. The “Olzha” and “Alatau” tapestries not only decorate the space, but also remind of the beauty and versatility of the country’s cultural heritage. These works of art become a bridge between the past and the present, between tradition and modernity. They invite us to reflect on the importance of nature, art, and culture in life, and contribute to the preservation and dissemination of the values of the people. The creation of the “Olzha” and “Alatau” tapestries is an example of a harmonious fusion of creative inspiration and professional craftsmanship, and they will undoubtedly remain in history as an important achievement of contemporary art.

The tapestries “Olzha” and “Alatau” possess significant symbolic meaning for Kazakh identity, grounded in natural settings and social memory. The Alatau mountain range, which dominates southeastern Kazakhstan, serves as a potent metaphor for durability, continuity, and protection. In Kazakh oral tradition, mountains are often portrayed as protectors of the people, symbolizing stability during historical instability. The tapestry’s depiction of towering mountains evokes this symbolism, representing the enduring nature of the nation’s cultural legacy and its geographical significance in forming identity. Simultaneously, “Olzha” (signifying “trophy” or “gain”) embodies a similarly intricate symbolism. Beyond its literal interpretation of prosperity and success, it embodies the challenges and ambitions of the Kazakh people in their quest for independence, self-determination, and contemporary accomplishments. Collectively, “Olzha” and “Alatau” function as dual metaphors. They highlight the expanse of Kazakhstan’s historical and natural wealth while simultaneously

illustrating the socio-cultural dynamics of a civilization balancing tradition with modern economic advancement. The diptych is a symbolic embodiment of resilience, hope, and national pride.

The tapestries shown in Figure 2 represent a manifestation of monumental and decorative art. Figure 2 shows images of these tapestries, which decorate the interior of the main office of Olzha. These works of art probably not only serve as aesthetic decoration, but may also symbolize important aspects of the company's activities and values. These tapestries probably also serve as some kind of visual element that emphasizes Olzha's connection to the culture and art of the region. The tapestries thus illustrate how monumental and decorative art can be incorporated into the office interiors of corporate organizations to create a unique atmosphere and highlight the cultural values of the company.

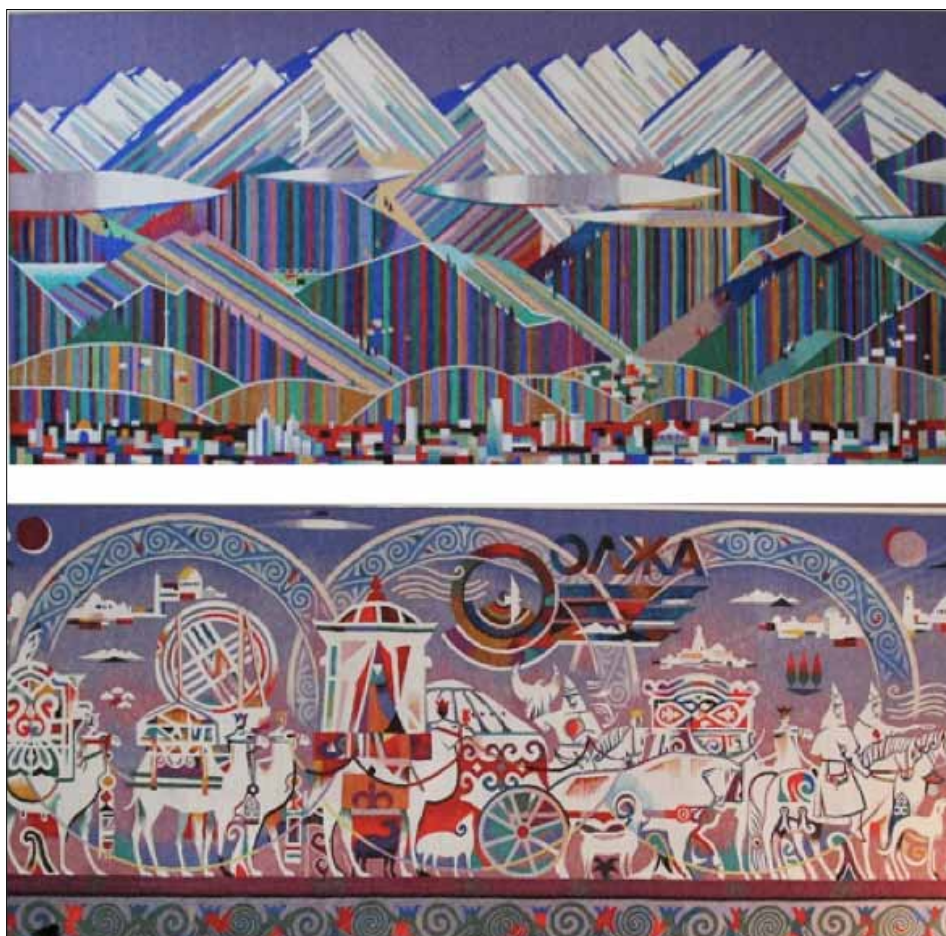


Figure 2. Tapestries in the main office of the Olzha Joint Stock Company, Almaty. Source: Audinet (2022).

The works of contemporary masters of artistic textiles transcend the framework of mechanical transmission of traditions, revealing a unique synthesis of past and present. They realize that cultural heritage is not static, but can be alive and relevant in the modern age. Tapestry artists realize that to achieve a harmonious fusion of tradition and innovation, it is necessary to make their own creative contribution. They use their unique artistic voices to bring individual vision and creative energy to the works. This approach gives their work

vibrancy and originality. Contemporary tapestry artists approach traditional elements of monumental and decorative art with respect, while exploring the possibilities of contemporary aesthetics. They blend familiar motifs and symbols with contemporary forms and styles, creating an interesting interplay between past and present. This synthesis allows them to create works that appeal to art historians and viewers, while maintaining a connection to their roots. One of the key features of this synthesis is the incorporation of innovative artistic methods and modern aesthetics into the traditional art of tapestry. This could be experimenting with color palettes, using modern techniques in production, or even integrating contemporary images and symbols into classical compositions. The synthesis of past and present in the works of contemporary textile artists is not just an attempt to perpetuate national heritage, but also an active demonstration of its dynamism. This approach emphasizes that cultural heritage can serve as a source of inspiration for new creative ideas and invest new meaning in a contemporary context. As a result, tapestry artists create works that transport us to a world where past and present are closely intertwined, inspiring the exploration and interpretation of national identity.

“The Golden Age of the Scythians” tapestry is an impressive masterpiece of art. This work, created by M. Mukanov, A. Zhamkhan and A. Kalacheva, embodies not only a magnificent visual impact, but also a significant historical and symbolic value. It transports us to the distant past, to an era when the Scythians were leading their magnificent civilization. The size of this work allows fully experiencing the grandeur and scale of the events it depicts. The reflection of detail and the mastery of imagery allow looking at this period of history from a new and profound perspective. The cooperation between the authors M. Mukanov, A. Zhamkhan and A. Kalacheva emphasizes the multifaceted nature of this period of history. It is not only the result of creative inspiration, but also the synergy of different ideas and visions, which came to life thanks to their unique abilities. “The Golden Age of the Scythians” not only recreates the beauty and importance of this historical period, but also serves as a reminder of the richness of the cultural heritage of the ancestors. This tapestry becomes a bridge between the past and present, allowing seeing how history shapes modernity. With its profound symbolic power, “The Golden Age of the Scythians” makes an important contribution to the understanding of history and tradition. Its presence in the space reminds us that culture and art are an integral part of life, capable of inspiring and transporting us to worlds of distant eras. This work of monumental and decorative art not only enriches the interior of the bank, but is also an important element of corporate identity.

The tapestry “The Golden Age of the Scythians” conveys history not through strict documentary precision but through a symbolic distillation of Scythian cultural symbols. The Scythians, nomadic tribes that formerly ruled the Eurasian steppe, left a unique creative legacy, most seen in the “animal style” embellishments present in gold artefacts, weaponry, and burial items. The tapestry features recognizable motifs, including stylized representations of horses and carnivorous animals, which in Scythian cosmology represent power, vigor, and the perpetual conflict between life and death. By integrating these symbols into the massive canvas, the artists establish a visual connection between the ancient Scythian perspective and the contemporary quest for national identity in Kazakhstan. The compositional appearance of the piece indicates both the qualities of Scythian civilization and its value as a cultural ancestor of contemporary Kazakh culture. The deliberate employment

of symbolic imagery, as opposed to rigorous historical reconstruction, underscores the interpretative role of art above its archival purpose. The tapestry references the Scythians as cultural antecedents, enabling current audiences to interpret their legacy through the lens of modern identity development and historical contemplation. Figure 3 shows this tapestry, which reflects the national culture and historical heritage of Kazakhstan, as well as link the bank to the rich history of the region, in this case, the Scythian era.



Figure 3. Golden era of the Scythians "Halykbank," Almaty. Source: (Minardi 2021).

Contemporary tapestry artists often refer to symbols and patterns that have become icons of Kazakhstan's national culture. These may be well-known national patterns, geometric motifs and decorative elements that have deep meaning and historical significance for the people. Incorporating these elements into artworks becomes a way to establish a connection with the culture and traditions of their people. In addition to patterns, artists also introduce symbols that play an important role in the formation of national identity. These symbols can be associated with historical events, national heroes or mythological characters. Their inclusion in the works gives them deep meaning and allows the viewer to feel connected to the rich history of the nation.

Some tapestry artists choose to depict key historical events that have influenced the formation of Kazakhstan's cultural heritage. They present these events through the prism of their art, giving them a new aesthetic interpretation and emphasizing their importance to the national identity. The use of national symbols and motifs in tapestries allows tapestry artists to communicate visually with the viewer. These symbols can be a key to understanding deep historical and cultural contexts, as well as a way to activate a sense of belonging to a national culture. As a result of the analysis, it becomes evident that contemporary art textile masters use the emblematics of national identity as a powerful means of visual communication. Their works become not only works of art, but also cultural symbols, enriching and revealing the meaning and richness of the cultural heritage of Kazakhstan in the modern context.

The creation of the monumental and decorative tapestry "At the Foot of the Sacred Tree" is an impressive contribution to the world of art. This work, created by M. Mukanov and

A. Zhamkhan, is imbued not only with visual beauty, but also with deep symbolism. The tapestry “At the Foot of the Sacred Tree” takes one into the world of magic and mysticism. The size of this work allows fully immersing oneself in its atmosphere, and the details and decorative elements reveal to us a unique world filled with symbols and meanings. Combining diverse visions and ideas creates a unique work that is not only pleasing to the eye, but also makes one think. “At the Foot of the Sacred Tree” becomes a bridge between reality and fantasy. It invites one into a world where the real and the imaginary intertwine together and opens up new ways of understanding and interpreting art. This tapestry is not just a work of art, but a source of inspiration. It reminds one of the importance of myths, legends, and stories in the formation of cultural identity, and how art can reveal many interpretations.

The tapestry “At the Foot of the Sacred Tree” is deeply rooted in the mythological and spiritual symbolism integral to Turkic and Kazakh cultural identity. In nomadic cosmology, the sacred tree frequently serves as a “world tree,” a vertical axis connecting the heavens, earth, and underworld. This is visually expressed through the lengthy trunk and branching shapes that prevail in the composition, indicating a conduit of communication between many cosmic realms. Ornamental motifs, spirals, luminous leaves, and stylized roots emphasise the concept of cyclical renewal and spiritual continuity. The figures and patterns positioned at the tree's base imply ceremonial assemblies and ancestral presence, establishing the tree as both a mythical origin of life and a centre of community identity. The tapestry employs graphic motifs that not only reference mysticism abstractly but also concretize it in a manner that aligns with enduring cultural beliefs like fertility, protection, and cosmic balance. This symbolic stratification enables the work to function both as a visual story and as a modern reactivation of spiritual archetypes within Kazakh identity.

Figure 4 shows a tapestry placed in the head office of Halyk Bank of Kazakhstan JSC (“Halykbank”) in Almaty. This tapestry probably serves as an interior element and at the same time may have a symbolic meaning within the corporate culture of the bank.



Figure 4. Head office of JSC “People’s Bank of Kazakhstan” (“Halykbank”), Almaty. Source: Elsayed et al. (2022).

Kazakh tapestry artists are progressively integrating traditional motifs with contemporary techniques, producing works that are both heritage-based and in harmony with global art trends. One of the most prominent artistic strategies is the modification of abstract and semi-abstract compositions, wherein conventional geometric patterns are reconfigured into modernist visual languages, generating a conflict between familiarity and innovation. Artists experiment with color gradation techniques, creating delicate changes that imitate the depth and dynamic of painting within woven forms. Technically, they use mixed-fiber weaving, integrating wool, silk, and occasionally synthetic threads to provide changes in texture, luminosity, and durability. Contemporary tapestries have relief weaving or layered surfaces, imparting a three-dimensional character that enriches spatial interaction. Furthermore, digital design tools are sometimes employed during the planning phase, facilitating accurate pattern manipulation prior to loom implementation. Through the integration of contemporary methodologies, artists broaden the expressive potential of tapestry, elevating it from a mere ornamental craft to a medium that interacts with modern aesthetics and conceptual issues.

The works of tapestry artists can mirror socio-cultural changes in society. They can respond to current issues, challenges, and events that shape contemporary society. The introduction of such themes into artworks makes them more relevant and understandable to contemporary audiences. Tapestry artists interact with contemporary society by using art as a means of communication. Their works can elicit dialogue and reflection from viewers, raising important questions and stimulating discussion of contemporary themes. This interaction promotes artists' active engagement with society. Contemporary art textile artists can interact with different cultures and arts, mixing ideas and styles (Huo and Skliarenko, 2024). This allows them to create works that not only reflect modernity, but are enriched by the influence of diverse cultural influences. Their works become a bridge between history and the present, allowing viewers to experience and understand contemporary challenges and transformations through an artistic perspective. Thus, they actively participate in the formation of cultural dialogue and enrichment of contemporary art (Balakrishnan, 2019).

In the context of the influence of the socio-cultural environment on contemporary tapestry artists in Kazakhstan, it becomes evident that artists largely reflect and interact with the current social and cultural trends characteristic of contemporary society. Further, some examples of world trends among tapestry artists will be given. The world wars of the 20th century had a strong influence on tapestry artists. A classic example of this influence is the tapestry "Battle for Hong Kong" by E. Beiber, created during the Second World War. In this work, the artist reflected the drama and patriotism of that era by depicting a battle in Hong Kong. With the development of digital technology, artists have begun to incorporate it into their work. An example is S. J. Hilton's Digital World tapestry series, in which the artist uses computer graphics and digital design to create unique textile works. Social movements and activism can encourage artists to create tapestries that express social change. For example, the tapestry "Women's Spring" from a series of works by French artist E. Flauvin reflects the feminist movement and women's rights. Environmental issues have become an important source of inspiration for artists. J. Axerson's "Coral Reef Collapse" illustrates the destruction of coral reef ecosystems and calls for their preservation.

Thus, these examples demonstrate how specific factors and changes in society influence the creativity of textile artists and stimulate them to create works that reflect current socio-cultural trends (Ponglawhapun and Utiswannakul, 2022). Contemporary Kazakhstan is characterized by multifaceted cultures, ethnic diversity and complex historical dynamics. Tapestry artists perceive this diversity as an important means of expressing their own individual identity. They endeavour to create works that are both in line with national traditions and adapted to contemporary reality, reflecting the diversity of cultural experiences. The social transformations associated with modernization and globalization actively influence the perception of art and artistic expressions. Contemporary tapestry artists respond to these transformations by engaging with new technologies, materials, and ideas. They often utilize contemporary methods and techniques to create works that will be relevant to contemporary audiences.

In the context of the modern world, where interaction between cultures is becoming increasingly intense, the works of tapestry artists serve as bridges connecting various aspects of cultural heritage and modernity. They often incorporate current social issues and global themes into their works. This may be related to environmental issues, social justice, gender equality issues and other challenges of our time. They use art as a means of expressing their views on complex issues and as a way to contribute to public debate. The sociocultural context of modern Kazakhstan has a profound influence on the work of artistic textile masters. They find inspiration in this context, engage with social change, and use their works to reflect the complexity of modern society. The results of this analysis highlight the importance and relevance of the art of modern monumental and decorative tapestry in the context of modern Kazakhstan.

Discussion

The research conducted in this paper emphasizes the importance of a balanced approach to the preservation of cultural heritage and the simultaneous development of new artistic ideas. The creation of tapestries combining traditional elements and modern artistic concepts shows a deep respect for the historical and cultural wealth of Kazakhstan. The approach aimed at integrating innovations into traditional art contributes to the development of a modern artistic paradigm in the country. The creation of tapestries becomes a platform for experimentation with a variety of techniques and materials that allow artists to express their individuality and contribute to the formation of new artistic trends. The findings of the study have the potential to have a positive impact on the contemporary art scene in Kazakhstan. New tapestries, embodying a synthesis of tradition and innovation, can become symbols of a unique cultural identity on the world stage. These works of art will not only support and strengthen national identity, but also contribute to enriching the world artistic heritage with new creative approaches and ideas.

Noroozi (2021) emphasizes the importance of the balance between tradition and modernity. Analyzing the works of Kazakhstani tapestry artists highlights their role in the preservation of cultural heritage and the formation of national identity. Studying artistic practice in the modern world, also notes that contemporary tapestry artists make an important contribution to the dialogue of contemporary art. However, it is worth noting that the attention is to be paid to the dynamic nature of contemporary artistic approaches, including tapestry. In

their work, they pay more attention to the general evolution of artistic art, while this study focuses specifically on monumental and decorative tapestries as an important component of art in Kazakhstan.

Soroka & Krawatzek (2021), studying Kazakhstani textile artists, emphasize their role in the preservation of cultural heritage and the formation of national identity through art. It is emphasized that they not only preserve traditions, but also actively contribute to the global dialogue of contemporary art, becoming an important part of the world artistic palette. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the dynamics of contemporary artistic approaches is noteworthy. Much attention is paid to the overall evolution of artistic endeavours in modernity. While this study takes an in-depth look at monumental and decorative tapestries as a means of forming national identity in modern Kazakhstan.

Wildgen (2023) emphasizes that contemporary tapestry artists from Kazakhstan successfully combine national traditions and the latest artistic approaches, creating works that resonate with contemporary audiences. This balance between heritage and modernity influences the formation of cultural identity. The works of Kazakhstan's masters of artistic textiles have a significant impact on the contemporary art dialogue, complementing the global art palette with unique aesthetics, innovations and national context, delving deeper into the analysis of monumental and decorative tapestries as a key art form in Kazakhstan. This specific direction gives the study a special value, allowing it to bring new aspects to the discussion of national identity through art.

Ilies et al. (2022) highlight the importance of the balance between tradition and modernity in the work of contemporary tapestry artists. Significance in preserving cultural heritage and shaping national identity. This is reflected in the current study, which also emphasizes the importance of combining heritage and modernity in the works of tapestry artists in Kazakhstan. The study of artistic practice in the contemporary world highlights that contemporary tapestry artists make an important contribution to the dialogue of contemporary art. This is consistent with the data of the study, where it is also noted that the works of Kazakh masters influence the art scene, enriching it with a unique national aesthetic. At the same time, it is worth noting the dynamic nature of contemporary artistic approaches, including tapestries. In contrast, this study takes an in-depth look at monumental and decorative tapestries as a key element of art in Kazakhstan. This focus emphasizes the importance and uniqueness of the art form in the context of national culture.

De Tiesenhausen (2020) emphasizes the importance of a balanced approach to combining traditional and modern elements in art. Considering the work of Kazakh artists, emphasizes their role in preserving national identity and shaping cultural heritage through a unique art-form. This approach is consistent with the data of the study, which also reveals the importance of the balance between tradition and modernity in the work of contemporary masters of artistic textiles. Their works have an important impact on enriching the contemporary artistic palette. This confirms similar conclusions of this study, which highlights that tapestry artists from Kazakhstan make a unique contribution to the artistic dialogue by combining national symbols with contemporary trends. However, I have delved deeper into analyzing specifically monumental and decorative tapestries as an important aspect of contemporary art in Kazakhstan. This focus allowed shedding light on a unique art form and its influence on the formation of national identity.

Blackburn (2019) emphasizes the significance of the synthesis of traditional and modern elements in the works of contemporary tapestry artists. Studying their work, emphasizes the ability to convey national values through the modern language of art. This is in line with the findings of this study, which emphasizes that contemporary tapestry artists strive to create works that combine national heritage and modern trends. The importance of maintaining a unique cultural identity in the context of globalization. This is also important in the current study, which analyses how contemporary art textile masters combine national symbols with global trends and contribute to artistic dialogue. On the other hand, it pays attention to the broader context of artistic approaches emphasizes the general evolution of artistic art. While in this study, the focus is narrowed on monumental and decorative tapestries as an important component of art in Kazakhstan (Malik, 2019; Esanu, 2021).

This study deeply analyses contemporary tapestry art in Kazakhstan and reveals that contemporary tapestry artists strive to preserve and transmit national heritage through a contemporary artistic language. Their ability to combine elements of tradition with innovation allows them to create works that not only reflect contemporary artistic trends, but are also imbued with a deep cultural heritage. The article emphasizes the role of the art of monumental and decorative tapestries in shaping the national identity of modern Kazakhstan. The works of muralists become a platform for discussion of national symbols, historical events and cultural values. This is important for strengthening cultural consciousness and maintaining connection with historical heritage. Contemporary masters of artistic textiles successfully interact with global artistic trends, integrating them into their works. This process not only allows them to remain relevant in the global art context, but also adds new perspectives to the global dialogue on contemporary art.

Conclusions

As a result of the study of contemporary monumental and decorative tapestry art in Kazakhstan, it becomes clear that this art plays an important and multifaceted role in expressing and strengthening national identity, as well as in the search for new artistic paradigms. The results of the analysis and interpretation of these works, studied in a theoretical context, allow drawing the following key conclusions, the art of monumental and decorative tapestry becomes an iconic symbol of the modern artistic paradigm of Kazakhstan, combining traditional artistic elements with innovative ideas. This synthesis demonstrates the cultural wealth of the country and allows artists to express their individual creative concepts. Monumental and decorative tapestries have a strong impact on the cultural environment, actively contributing to the preservation and interpretation of the national heritage. Incorporating traditional motifs and symbols into contemporary works of art creates a unique context where past and present come together to create a profound emotional and cultural experience.

The art of monumental and decorative tapestry becomes a platform for dialogue between the past and the future. These works not only perpetuate history and tradition, but also bring fresh interpretations, adapting to the contemporary context and showing the importance of dynamic artistic development. The art of contemporary monumental and decorative tapestry in Kazakhstan plays a key role in the search for new artistic paradigms and the strengthening of national identity. By combining tradition and innovation, tapestries reflect the dynamic cultural evolution of the country, and emphasize the importance of

preserving cultural heritage and its adaptation to modern challenges. These findings emphasize the practical and theoretical significance of the study for artists, cultural practitioners and researchers, and point to further research perspectives in this area. Further research could focus on a deeper analysis of the traditions and symbols used in monumental and decorative tapestries. This would help to better understand the relationship between the past and the present, as well as identify changes and evolution in the use of these elements.

Research can also focus on assessing the impact of monumental and decorative tapestries on the cultural environment and society as a whole. What emotional and cultural experiences they evoke in viewers and how this affects the formation of identity and cultural consciousness. Further research can delve deeper into exploring contemporary artistic practices used in the creation of monumental tapestries. What innovative techniques and materials artists use and how this affects the outcome of their work. Research in this area can be interdisciplinary, including analyzing the impact of monumental decorative tapestries on architecture, interior design, and cultural policy. What might be the interactions between these areas of art and practice. An important aspect of further research is the issue of preservation and promotion of monumental and decorative tapestry art. Thus, the study of contemporary monumental and decorative tapestry art in Kazakhstan provides a basis for further research and development in this area, which can make an important contribution to understanding the cultural and artistic evolution of the region and the country as a whole.

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Memory and Pride through Photographic Collage Arts:

The Art Within - Collage Me Proud

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Abstract

This article presents The Art Within - Collage Me Proud, an inclusive art initiative in Thailand involving undergraduate art students and persons with Down syndrome. Originating from photographic documentation of traditional Thai performance, the project developed into a participatory collage-making process that encouraged self-expression, co-creation, and shared memory. Through visual storytelling, participants selected meaningful photographs and transformed them into personal artworks with support from students and parents. Findings reveal consistently positive outcomes: participants reported pride, joy, and confidence; caregivers observed improved social interaction and wellbeing; and students demonstrated enhanced empathy, communication, and critical awareness of art's role in society. Data were collected through evaluation forms, reflective interviews, and visual documentation. The project demonstrates how art operates not only as aesthetic production but also as dialogical and participatory practice. Situated in a Thai cultural context, it contributes to broader discussions on socially engaged art, inclusive education, and cultural sustainability in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Participatory Art, Photographic Collage, Down Syndrome, Inclusive Arts Education, Arts-Based Learning, Cultural Sustainability*

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Introduction

In recent years, art has increasingly been recognized not merely as an individual act of creativity but as a collective and civic practice. Socially engaged art, in particular, highlights the transformative potential of participatory methods in creating spaces where diverse voices can contribute to cultural production and social dialogue (Helguera 2011; Bishop 2012). These approaches emphasize art not as a static object but as an evolving process of collaboration, where participants are invited to negotiate meaning, identity, and belonging. Within this discourse, photography and collage play unique roles: they are both accessible forms of expression and powerful vehicles for memory, representation, and visibility (Barthes 1981; Sontag 1977).

Despite global advancements in participatory and inclusive arts, children and adults with Down syndrome in many societies – including Thailand – often face limited opportunities to engage meaningfully in artistic creation. Research in the Thai context has demonstrated the value of art activities in enhancing social behaviors and self-confidence among children with special needs (Kasetsin et al. 2019). However, few initiatives have bridged university art education with community-based participatory practice, particularly in ways that engage students, families, and persons with disabilities as equal co-creators. This gap underscores the need for models of collaboration that integrate academic learning, community engagement, and cultural sustainability.

“The Art Within - Collage Me Proud” was developed as a response to this need. The project originated in the author’s collaboration with the Joe Louis Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre¹ and the Five for All Foundation² in a program titled “Dream, Play, and Preserve Thai Puppetry.” In this program, persons with Down syndrome were taught Thai classical dance and puppetry by professional artists. The initiative not only created opportunities for cultural participation but also resulted in a compelling set of documentary photographs capturing moments of rehearsal, performance, and personal expression. These images became the foundation for the next phase: a photographic collage workshop designed to transform memory into visual storytelling.

In the collage workshops, participants with Down syndrome were invited to select their favorite photographs, print and reassemble them on mixed media surfaces, and narrate their own stories through collage. Importantly, this creative process was facilitated not only by university art students but also by parents and caregivers. Students acted as collaborators rather than instructors, while families provided encouragement, emotional presence, and continuity between the workshop and everyday life. This triangular structure – students, families, and children – reflected the principles of inclusive participation and co-creation, reinforcing the role of art as a shared practice rather than an individual endeavor.

The project’s significance lies in how it repositions persons with Down syndrome from being passive recipients of care to active cultural contributors. The photographs and collages were more than artistic outputs; they functioned as cultural texts where pride, memory, and representation were visually articulated. Public exhibition of these works further amplified their impact, creating visibility for marginalized voices and challenging deficit-based narratives about disability. Within higher education, this initiative demonstrates how art curricula can extend beyond the classroom, integrating community engagement, inclusive pedagogy, and cultural heritage into a cohesive practice. Ultimately, “The Art Within - Collage Me Proud” illustrates the potential of socially engaged visual art to foster empathy, dignity, and social transformation at both personal and collective levels.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the potential of photographic collage arts as a collaborative and inclusive practice that connects diverse participants through memory, creativity, and cultural expression. The specific objectives are:

1. To document meaningful memories through photographic collage arts, highlighting both creative expression and memory-based learning among persons with Down syndrome.
2. To promote collaborative and experiential learning between university art students, persons with Down syndrome, and their families through participatory art-making processes.
3. To create inclusive learning environments that empower children and adults with special needs to express their identities and talents, while simultaneously enhancing university students' empathy, communication, and facilitation skills.
4. To strengthen cultural literacy by disseminating and reinterpreting the value of Thai traditional performing arts through a contemporary, co-creative lens that fosters greater understanding of heritage.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

While several Thai studies have addressed the value of arts education in improving social behavior among children with special needs (e.g., Kasetsin et al. 2019), few have explored collaborative partnerships between universities and marginalized communities using co-creative, inclusive methodologies. This project fills that gap by offering a case study of participatory practice situated within a Thai cultural and educational context.

In parallel with prior research published in the *Journal of Urban Culture Research* (JUCR), this project extends the discourse of inclusive and participatory art in Southeast Asia. Nakagawa (2013) emphasizes art as a mechanism for enhancing social accessibility, arguing that community-based creative engagement can strengthen social inclusion and equality. Similarly, Binson and Kinear (2013) explore Creative Arts Therapy with Thailand's Mobile Arts Therapy Group, demonstrating how artistic processes can nurture emotional well-being and mutual understanding across diverse participants. These approaches resonate with *The Art Within - Collage Me Proud*, where artistic co-creation functions as a social bridge – fostering empathy, empowerment, and belonging among children with Down syndrome, their families, and undergraduate art students.

This project is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that combines concepts from socially engaged art, inclusive education, visual anthropology, and cultural memory. Each theoretical strand contributes to a deeper understanding of how art can serve as both process and platform for inclusive participation, co-creation, and social visibility.

Socially Engaged Art

Art for Social Change emphasizes the use of art not only for aesthetic purposes but also for emotional development, empowerment, and civic engagement. Rather than positioning participants as passive receivers, this perspective values them as active agents who can express, negotiate, and transform their realities through art. Socially engaged art involves community participation and addresses social issues through collaboration and creative interaction. Helguera (2011) emphasizes art as an educational and dialogical process, while Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* frames art as a participatory tool for empowerment and social change (Boal 1979).

In this project, photographic collage arts were employed not as a therapeutic tool but as a means to foster dialogue, shared agency, and mutual respect among diverse participants. Through image-making and storytelling, participants with Down syndrome were empowered to tell their own stories, gaining visibility and recognition within a public and academic context.

Inclusive Participation and Non-Formal Learning

Inclusive participation centers on designing artistic and educational processes that ensure individuals with different abilities, backgrounds, or social identities can engage equally and meaningfully. Eisner (2002) highlights how art can facilitate multiple forms of intelligence, creating accessible platforms for diverse learners. Greene (1995) argues for art's ability to foster empathy and pluralism by engaging imagination and shared experiences. In parallel, visual anthropology explores how images – particularly photographs – function as cultural texts that reflect and construct social meanings. Such frameworks underpin the project's inclusive pedagogy, where art students and children with disabilities become co-learners.

In this project, persons with Down syndrome were not merely subjects of observation but co-authors of their narratives. Their reinterpretation of traditional Thai performance through collage served both as a personal expression and as a contribution to broader cultural conversations, consistent with the participatory values of inclusive education and ethnographic practice.

Photographic Storytelling and Cultural Memory

Photography functions not merely as a documentary medium, but as a conduit for memory, affect, and interpretation. As Barthes (1981) articulates through the concept of *punctum*, certain images possess the capacity to penetrate the viewer emotionally, revealing layers of personal resonance. Likewise, Sontag (1977) underscores photography's role in shaping collective memory and fostering moral engagement with its subjects. Within this framework, photographic storytelling emerges as a socially situated practice – one that connects individual experience to broader cultural narratives and enables participants to express their perspectives through visual means.

In this project, photographs taken during traditional Thai puppet and dance workshops were later transformed into collage pieces. These works allowed participants to reclaim their favorite moments, express pride in their performance, and frame their own visual narratives – turning memory into material for co-creative authorship.

Empowerment Through Visibility

Building on Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of critical pedagogy, empowerment through visibility asserts that marginalized individuals can gain power and dignity when their voices, stories, and identities are acknowledged in public spaces. Artistic expression becomes a political and ethical act, one that resists erasure and asserts presence. McNiff (2004) adds that artistic visibility contributes to agency and resilience, particularly for marginalized communities.

In this project, the public exhibition of works created by persons with Down syndrome – alongside documentation and reflections – challenged the deficit-based narratives often imposed upon disability. Instead of being positioned as "recipients" of care or charity, participants emerged as cultural contributors and creative leaders, reshaping how society sees and engages with disability.

Taken together, these four strands of theory – socially engaged art, inclusive participation, photographic storytelling, and empowerment through visibility – provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the project's design. They highlight how art can function as a dialogical and participatory practice that simultaneously nurtures personal growth, fosters social bonds, and generates cultural visibility. Grounded in these perspectives, the following methodology details how the project was structured to integrate creative practice, inclusive pedagogy, and research ethics into a coherent process of co-creation.

Methodology

Building upon the theoretical foundations of socially engaged art, inclusive participation, and visual anthropology, the study adopted a practice-based methodology designed to integrate creative processes with collaborative learning. This research employed a qualitative, practice-based approach rooted in socially engaged art and participatory action research. The process was structured around collaborative workshops, visual documentation, and reflective interviews, focusing on how co-creation in art can foster mutual understanding and emotional expression among diverse participants.

Project Structure and Participants

This project included creative activities collaboratively conducted between university art students and 11 persons with Down syndrome who previously joined the project “Dream, Play, and Preserve Thai Puppetry,” hosted by the Joe Louis Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre and the Five for All Foundation. The initiative aimed to provide inclusive access to Thai classical dance and puppet performance with professional artists.

Regarding research ethics, this project was reviewed and approved by the Chulalongkorn University Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Participants (CU-REC), Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts. All participants and their guardians provided informed consent prior to involvement. The project adhered to CU-REC's ethical standards emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the welfare of individuals with disabilities.

Participants Groups and Selection Criteria

The project involved three key participant groups:

Group 1: Persons with Down Syndrome (11 individuals)

- Previously participated in “Dream, Play, and Preserve Thai Puppetry.”
- Physically and mentally able to engage safely in artistic activities.
- Provided informed assent and consent from guardians.

Group 2: Family Members or Caregivers (11 individuals)

- Legal guardians or primary caregivers of Group 1.
- Consented to participation and data collection.
- Agreed to participate in interviews and reflective discussions.

Group 3: Undergraduate Art Students (11 individuals)

- Volunteered through an open call by the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts.
- Expressed interest in working with vulnerable social groups.
- Participated in project orientation and committed to full workshop involvement.

Recruitment and Communication Process

Participants were recruited through the Five for All Foundation, an organization supporting children with disabilities and their families. Prior to the project launch, researchers hosted a briefing session for parents and distributed information and consent forms in plain language.

Creative Process and Artistic Method

The project unfolded through a sequence of carefully planned stages that integrated collaborative planning, documentary photography, and hands-on artistic workshops. The steps were as follows:

1. Initial Planning and Research Instruments Development

The project team conducted preparatory meetings to establish the conceptual direction, outline the workshop structure, and design research instruments tailored to each participant group. This phase also involved consultation with specialists in inclusive education and visual arts.

2. Participant Coordination

Through collaboration with the Five for All Foundation, 11 individuals with Down syndrome were invited to participate. Consent forms and introductory materials were provided in accessible formats for families and guardians.

3. Documentary Photography of Artistic Activities

A documentary photography process was conducted to capture both the rehearsal sessions and the final stage performances in puppetry and traditional Thai dance. This created a visual archive reflecting not only the participants' artistic growth and cultural engagement but also their confidence, joy, and stage presence. (This step was made possible as the research team had already been invited to document the puppetry workshop by the Joe Louis Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre, resulting in a rich collection of photographs prior to the formal launch of the collage project.)



Figure 1. Art students documenting the rehearsal process of Thai traditional dance and puppetry workshops with participants with Down syndrome. The photographs captured not only physical movements but also expressions of joy, concentration, and shared learning. This phase served as the foundation for later collage-making activities, allowing participants to revisit meaningful moments through visual storytelling.

4. Image Selection and Printing Preparation

Following the photography phase, selected images highlighting key moments were curated and printed in various sizes and formats. This preparatory stage ensured that participants would have a wide array of personalized visual material for their collage artworks.



Figure 2. Art student facilitators collaboratively selecting, editing, and printing photographic materials in preparation for the collage workshop. This preparatory phase was essential for ensuring that participants with Down syndrome had access to diverse, high-quality images that resonated with their individual experiences, allowing for more personalized and meaningful artistic expression during the collage-making process.

5. Photographic Collage Workshop

A hands-on workshop was hosted in a studio setting, where art students co-facilitated the creative process alongside participants with Down syndrome. Each participant was encouraged to select, cut, arrange, and compose their own collage artworks using printed photographs, decorative materials, and thematic visual elements. The presence of the art students served not only as facilitators but also as empathetic collaborators, supporting communication, confidence, and co-creation throughout the activity.

In addition to the students' involvement, parents and caregivers were invited to participate directly in the workshop. Their engagement transformed the creative space into a shared experience – one in which family members could bond, reflect, and celebrate the unique voices of their children. This inclusive approach recognized parents not merely as observers but as crucial enablers of opportunity, whose encouragement and support play a pivotal role in sustaining participation and creative expression for persons with Down syndrome. The activity thus became a site of collective authorship, empathy-building, and family-based empowerment.



Figure 3. Participants engaging in the photographic collage workshop, selecting and reinterpreting images from their traditional puppetry and dance experience. The hands-on process emphasizes inclusive participation, creative agency, and the translation of memory into visual expression.

6. Documentation and Reflection

Upon completion of the collage workshop, the project team conducted documentation and reflective activities to capture participants' experiences and insights. This included video recordings, still photography, and informal conversations during the creative process.

In addition, structured interviews were carried out with all participant groups:

- Children with Down syndrome were interviewed in a casual, supportive environment. They were invited to talk about their collage artworks – why they chose particular images, what stories they wanted to tell, and how the artwork reflected their own feelings and identity.
- Parents and caregivers were asked to reflect on their child's emotional responses, behavioral changes, and the perceived value of participating in the activity.
- Art students participated in reflective interviews to evaluate their learning outcomes, personal development, and perspectives on inclusive art-making.

These reflections provided essential qualitative data that enriched the project's evaluation and offered meaningful narratives to complement the visual outputs.



Figure 4. Reflective interview sessions with project participants. Left, A child with Down syndrome and her parent share their thoughts about the collage artwork, explaining the chosen images and their personal meaning. Right, Art student facilitators reflect on their learning experiences, inclusive collaboration, and insights gained from the project.

7. Feedback and Data Collection

Evaluation forms and observational notes were collected from all three stakeholder groups – participants with Down syndrome, caregivers, and art students – to assess learning outcomes, emotional impact, and collaborative dynamics.

8. Public Exhibition

The final collages, along with selected documentation, were presented in a physical exhibition. A digital showcase was also developed to extend visibility and impact, allowing broader audiences to engage with the stories and voices of the participants.

Research Instruments and Design Process

To evaluate the psychological, emotional, and learning outcomes of participants, three tailored research instruments were developed:

1. Feedback and Pride Evaluation Form for Persons with Down Syndrome (Likert 3-point scale): Designed with accessible language and visual aids to gauge feelings of enjoyment and pride. When needed, caregivers assisted in completing the forms.
2. Parent and Caregiver Survey (Likert 5-point scale, with open-ended items): A semi-structured tool to assess emotional responses, perceived developmental progress, and satisfaction with the artistic process.
3. Student Reflection and Learning Assessment Form (Likert 5-point scale + narrative responses): Encouraged art students to reflect on shifts in perception, empathetic growth, and learning outcomes gained through collaboration.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from Likert scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean scores, frequency distributions) to identify patterns in pride, enjoyment, learning outcomes, and social interaction. Qualitative data from open-ended responses and interviews were analyzed thematically, focusing on emergent themes such as empowerment, collaboration, and shifting perceptions of art's societal role. Triangulation across persons with Down syndrome, caregivers, and art students ensured validity and revealed convergent insights into the project's impact.

The research instruments, procedures, and processes were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subject research ethics. Each instrument included both structured questions and open-ended prompts to capture both measurable and narrative-based insights.

Results

The evaluation results from three sets of assessment tools – participants with Down syndrome, their caregivers, and art student collaborators – demonstrate a consistently positive impact across emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions.

Persons with Down Syndrome

The self-assessment and assisted evaluations reveal high levels of pride, enjoyment, and engagement:

- All average scores ranged between 2.8 to 3 (maximum) on a 3-point scale.
- Participants expressed joy in participating, pride in their artworks, and enthusiasm to join similar activities in the future.
- Emotional indicators such as smiling, laughing, and willingness to share their work received top scores.
- Open-ended responses highlighted experiences of friendship, creativity, and confidence, with repeated requests for more opportunities to engage in similar activities.

Parents and Caregivers

Caregivers overwhelmingly affirmed the program's benefits:

- Scores averaged 4.83 to 5.0 on a 5-point scale, particularly noting:
 - Children's emotional wellbeing and increased confidence.
 - The positive influence of art students on behavior and communication,
 - A supportive, joyful, and inclusive environment.

- Narrative responses emphasized:
 - A sense of pride and emotional connection, both for children and families.
 - Observable improvements in focus, creativity, and peer interaction.
 - The activity's role in strengthening family bonds and fostering social inclusion.

Art students

The reflective evaluation from participating art students illustrated deep learning outcomes:

- Most items scored above 4.5 out of 5.
- Students reported:
 - Enhanced understanding of special needs populations.
 - Increased empathy, communication & facilitation skills.
 - Expanded perspectives on the role of art in society.
- Qualitative feedback revealed:
 - Appreciation for the authenticity and sincerity of interactions.
 - Recognition of art as a tool for social connection, empowerment & transformation.
 - Initial apprehensions turned into confidence and personal growth through hands-on experience.
 - Many proposed that such activities should be sustained, expanded, or integrated into the curriculum.

Synthesis and Emergent Themes

This study reveals how collaborative photographic collage arts can serve as a generative space for inclusive creativity, learning, and identity formation. Quantitative results from the evaluation forms indicate overwhelmingly positive experiences among all stakeholder groups.

Qualitative responses yielded rich themes that offer deeper insight:

- Empowerment through Self-Expression: The process enabled ownership, pride, and personal storytelling. Participants with Down syndrome articulated their identities visually, aligning with McNiff's (2004) notion of visibility as a pathway to dignity and Freire's (1970) argument that expression in public spaces fosters empowerment.
- Relational Impact and Mutual Learning: Genuine connections were built across generations. Students saw themselves as co-creators rather than facilitators, resonating with Helguera's (2011) concept of dialogical art and Greene's (1995) view of art as a catalyst for empathy and pluralism.
- Reframing the Role of Art: Participants and students alike came to see art as ethical, participatory, and socially transformative, reflecting Bishop's (2012) emphasis on art as a socially engaged practice that bridges aesthetics and civic life. This reframing also echoed Barthes' (1981) and Sontag's (1977) observations of photography as a cultural text that connects personal memory to collective meaning.

Cross-analysis shows patterns of mutual reinforcement: pride from participants, validation by caregivers, and personal growth among students. Together, the project highlights art's potential to bridge divides and foster inclusion, consistent with theories of socially engaged and participatory art (Boal, 1979; Helguera, 2011).

Figure 5. Children and young adults with Down syndrome proudly display their completed

photographic collage artworks, each piece reflecting their individual memories, creativity, and experiences from the traditional Thai puppetry and dance workshop. The image captures a celebratory moment featuring all 11 participants alongside the Dean of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, and the lead researcher. This photograph illustrates the project's core values – visibility, empowerment, and inclusive collaboration – while highlighting the joy and dignity experienced by each participant through artistic expression.

These findings not only confirm the project's objectives but also open critical questions about the broader role of art in education and society. The emergent themes suggest that participatory photographic collage practices can extend beyond individual empowerment to challenge cultural perceptions of disability, foster intergenerational collaboration, and reposition art as a socially transformative practice. These implications will be explored further in the Discussion section, where the results are situated within wider debates on inclusive pedagogy, community engagement, and cultural sustainability.

Conclusion

This project demonstrated the potential of photographic collage as a medium for inclusive artistic engagement, memory-making, and mutual learning. Through collaboration between university art students, persons with Down syndrome, and their caregivers, the initiative created a platform for co-creation that fostered pride, self-expression, and emotional connection. Evaluation results consistently revealed positive outcomes across all groups – emotional fulfillment and creativity among participants with Down syndrome, pride and satisfaction among caregivers, and attitudinal and empathic growth among art students.

The participants with special needs were empowered to articulate their inner worlds and cultural heritage through visual storytelling, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. At the same time, the students gained profound insights into inclusive art practices, empathy, and the social role of the arts. Importantly, the project also functioned as a contemporary reinterpretation of Thai traditional performing arts. By integrating cultural motifs into the collage-making process, it invited diverse participants to engage with heritage in meaningful and modern ways.

Overall, the project effectively achieved its research objectives: documenting personal memories through visual art, facilitating collaborative learning, promoting the visibility of marginalized voices, and reinterpreting Thai traditional performance arts through a contemporary, inclusive lens. These outcomes affirm the role of art not only as an aesthetic pursuit but also as a social process that promotes dignity, participation, and community engagement.

Building upon these conclusions, the following discussion examines the broader theoretical and practical implications, situating the findings within discourses of socially engaged art, inclusive pedagogy, and cultural sustainability.

Discussion

The findings of this project reaffirm the transformative capacity of participatory art practices in fostering inclusion, self-expression, and social connection. For persons with Down syndrome, the collage-making process provided not only an avenue for creative expression but also a platform for visibility and recognition. Their ability to narrate personal stories

through images reflects what Barthes (1981) described as *punctum* – moments in photography that emotionally pierce both creator and viewer. Similarly, Sontag (1977) emphasized photography's power to shape collective memory, and here, the collages served as cultural texts that articulated memory, identity, and pride.

For university art students, the project challenged conventional notions of art as a purely aesthetic or individual pursuit. Engaging not as instructors but as collaborators, students experienced a redefinition of their role in artistic practice. This aligns with Helguera's (2011) and Bishop's (2012) perspectives on socially engaged art as dialogical and ethical processes, where learning emerges through co-creation rather than one-way transmission. Students' reflections demonstrated heightened empathy, improved communication skills, and a broadened understanding of art as a social practice – outcomes consistent with Eisner's (2002) notion of multiple forms of learning through the arts.

Caregivers also played a crucial role in reinforcing empowerment and sustaining participation. Their active involvement in the workshops echoed Freire's (1970) principle of empowerment through visibility, as they witnessed their children celebrated in academic and cultural spaces. Their narratives revealed not only pride in their children's achievements but also strengthened family bonds and increased social inclusion. These findings suggest that participatory art projects can extend their impact beyond individual participants, generating relational and communal benefits that resonate across generations.

Together, these results highlight the significance of integrating traditional cultural forms into contemporary participatory art. By embedding Thai puppetry and dance into the collage-making process, the project fostered both cultural sustainability and inclusivity. As Boal (1979) argued in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, art can act as a participatory tool for social transformation. In this context, heritage was not preserved in isolation but reinterpreted and revitalized through collaborative creation, making cultural practices accessible to those often excluded from mainstream narratives.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the outcomes were overwhelmingly positive, the project was limited by its small sample size and short duration, restricting the ability to measure long-term impacts. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies that track the sustained influence of such projects on participants' confidence, learning, and social inclusion. Expanding the range of artistic forms – such as digital media, performance, or community mural-making – may further enhance accessibility and creative engagement. Additionally, institutionalizing such inclusive practices within university curricula could strengthen the role of higher education in bridging cultural, social, and generational divides.

Endnotes

- 1 The Joe Louis Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre, officially recognized as a national cultural heritage institution, continues the legacy of traditional Hun Lakorn Lek puppetry founded by Sakorn Yangkhawsood, Thailand's National Artist. The theatre regularly collaborates with community and educational initiatives that preserve Thai performance heritage through creative adaptation and inclusive workshops.
- 2 The Five for All Foundation is a non-profit organization established to support children with disabilities and their families across Thailand. Its programs focus on arts, education, and social development, creating safe environments where individuals with special needs can participate fully in creative and cultural activities.

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Analytical Approach to Find Effective Factors

On Users' Attachment to Public Spaces
(Case Study: Khayyam Street, Qazvin)

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Abstract

Different physical, social, activity and meaning aspects define public spaces as a social space. Several studies argue the relations between those main aspects and users' attachment to such spaces. In this regard, this study tries to evaluate the significance of the relations between those four mentioned aspects in a selected public space based on the citizens' choice as a successful and desirable urban space. Data have been analyzed by SPSS software and the results indicate all of mentioned dimensions have a positive significance correlation users' attachment to the place. Although, the result of path analysis shows activity aspect has an indirect effect on users' attachment to the place the regression analysis result shows activity aspect has no significant effect on place attachment (P value > 0.05). In contrast, social aspect of the place which affected by other aspects, mainly by activity aspect; has the highest score ($T=11.680$). In addition, users' attachment degree depends on the physical potential of space during time and involving to the place activities. In this regard, three indicators: aesthetic values, variety of activity and time play key role in formation of the users' attachment in the public spaces.

Keywords: Place Attachment, Public Space, Social Aspect, Physical Aspect, Meaning Aspect, Activity Aspect, Aesthetics Values, Iran

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Introduction

The factors that contribute to place attachment are multifaceted. It is a process that has many inseparable and mutually defining place characteristics: activity, physical and meaning (based on Canter's place theory). In order to investigate such an important aspect of the relation between human and environment, place attachment; a public space as an important social space in the public life of cities was selected. Following several researches studying public spaces by their different characteristics such as climate comfort (Linday, 1978), contextual features (Chidister, 1988), natural elements (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1982 and Stedman et al, 2004) and activities (Whyte, 1980 and Wooley, 2003) we tried to gather different aspects of a successful public spaces. As there was a wide range of indicators each of which refers to different aspects of a place we tried to categorize them into four aspects including physical, activity, social and meaning aspects.

Now in this study, there are some important questions to be answered. The questions are: Do physical, activity, social and meaning aspects have any effects on user's attachment to Khayyam Street as a public space? How the degrees of these effects are and which of them is the most effective factor anticipating place attachment degree? Which indicators of those mentioned aspects have the most significant impact on place attachment? Finally, how we can develop place attachment to public spaces and in this regard which place characteristics should be taken into consideration while we are designing and programming those spaces?

A Definition of Place Attachment

Place attachment is an affective bond or link between people and specific places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Moore & Graefe, 1994; Williams et al, 1992) based on cognition and affect (Low & Altman, 1992; Proshansky et al, 1983). This term has been defined as a positive emotional bond with a particular place (Low & Altman, 1992). Altman and Low explain that, "place attachment subsumes or is subsumed by a variety of analogous ideas, including topophilia, place identity, insidedness, genres of place, sense of place or rootedness, environmental embeddedness, community sentiment and identity to name a few" (ibid:3). In addition, place attachment facilitates a sense of security and well-being, defines group boundaries, and stabilizes memories (Halbwachs, 1980) over the passage of time (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Chawla, 1992; Marcus 1992; Read et al 1997; Rubinstein & Parmelee 1992). The studies show that place attachment not only can be considered as an emotional needs in our place but it has different effects in our life and can enhanced the effect of restorative experiences on perceived health benefits and more importantly positively moderated the mediating effect of restorative experiences (Zhou et al., 2024). Moreover, Dalavong and his colleagues emphasized the mediating roles of place attachment and place image in the relationship between placeness and behavioral intention (Dalavong et al. 2024).

Gieryn (2000) argues that place attachment results from many factors including accumulated geographical experience, socially and culturally shared activities and the geography and architecture of the place. Experiences that produce place attachment are described as "fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, triumphant, secret events that happen to us there" (Gieryn, 2000:481). The longer people have lived in a place, the more rooted they feel, and the greater their attachment will be (Elder et al, 1996). Gieryn stated that the loss of place and its meaning have negative implications for individuals' collective identity, memory and history

(Gieryn, 2000). In a study about the workplace, Milligan (1998) found that place attachment is based on nostalgic memories of past experiences in a physical setting and anticipations that positive encounters might continue in the future.

Giuliani and Feldman defined place attachment as the multiple affective, cognitive, and behavioral relationships between people and socio-physical environment (Giuliani & Feldman, 1993:273). Similarly, Low and Altman (1992) considered the range of place attachment definitions in literature and noted that one consistently defining aspect of the concept was its emotional quality. They did not over emphasize this quality, but pointed to others in the field who had argued that place attachment also includes cognition and behavior: "That is, an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions in reference to place" (Low and Altman, 1992:5).

Theorists have tried to categorize place attachment. For example, Schreyer et al (1981) considered place attachment in terms of two dimensions; functional and emotional. Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) also empirically defined place attachment as consisting of two-dimensions: place identity and place dependence. In a study by reviewing the relevant literature, 10 sub-categories for place dependency and place identity were introduced. In this research place dependency defined by 7 sub-categories including practical use, visual appreciation, linking to place via tangible elements, feelings and emotions, safety and privacy, social bonding and gathering, and individual preferences, and place identity described by 3 sub-categories including memory and meaning, identity building with reference to history, defining place attachment (Bazrafshan et al, 2021).

Place Identity

This term refers to Proshansky's concept of place identity. The notion of place identity is described as "those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment. While an individual's place identity reflects the specific experiences and socialization unique to that individual, place identity also reflects those experiences common to all individuals and groups of individuals living in particular kinds of settings" (Proshansky, 1978:155). Place identity is also described as the symbolic connection between an individual and a place (Stedman, 2002). Place identity is a psychological investment in a place that has developed over time. In this regard, place affirms individual or group identity referring to indicators of emotional or affective attachment. Place identity can be both cognitive and affective; yet it remains unclear how these separate factors operate in defining place identity (Williams & Patterson, 1999). "These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience, which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the 'environmental past' of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person's biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs" (Proshansky et al, 1983:59). Following Proshansky's study, Twigger-Ross and his colleague attempted to describe place identity. They developed key aspects of identity: self-esteem, self-efficacy, distinctiveness and continuity; based on Breakwells' identity process model. Their study can be used as a means of conceptualizing the relationship between individuals or groups and places (Austin, 2003).

Place Dependence

The second component of Williams and Roggenbuck's scale, place dependence, is conceptually similar to both Schreyer et al. (1981) and Stokols and Shumaker's (1981) components. Functional attachments, or what Stokols and Shumaker (1981) describe as place dependence, have to do with the opportunities the setting affords for fulfillment of specific goals or activity needs? Place dependence is a functional attachment associated with the capacity or potential of a place to support the needs, goals, or intended activities of a person (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981; Williams & Vaske, 2003).

Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) developed instrumentation to measure these two components of place attachment that has been shown to be valid and reliable over time (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Williams & Vaske, 2003). Williams and Vaske (2003) developed a valid and reliable 12-item, 5-point Likert scale place-attachment survey, initially used in recreational settings. However, it can be generalized to other situations. Internal-consistency reliability (Cronbach's alphas ranging from .81 to .94) for the final 12-item survey was also reported (figure's 1 table). We adopted this valid and reliable instrument verbatim to measure place attachment in a public space discussed below.

-
- | | |
|-----|---|
| 1. | I feel that this place is a part of me. |
| 2. | This place is the best place for what I like to do. |
| 3. | This place is very special to me. |
| 4. | No other place can compare to this place. |
| 5. | I identify strongly with this place. |
| 6. | I get more satisfaction out of being at this place than at any other. |
| 7. | I am very attached to this place. |
| 8. | Doing what I do at this place is more important to me than doing it in any other place. |
| 9. | Being at this place says a lot about who I am |
| 10. | I wouldn't substitute any other area for doing the types of things I do at this place. |
| 11. | This place means a lot to me. |
| 12. | The things I do at this place I would enjoy doing just as much at a similar site. |
-

Figure 1. Table of the twelve items for surveying place attachment (Williams and Vaske, 2003).

Several studies have shown that place attachment is associated with environmentally responsible behavior (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). In fact, positive attachments to a place may be linked to individuals' willingness to participate in the protection of that place (Relph, 1977; Schultz, 2000; Tuan, 1977; Walker & Chapman, 2003). Therefore, place attachment study has another important dimension that, in this study, was named behavioral bonds. In this regard, the effects of place attachment on enhancing participant's behaviors in a place evaluated behavioral bonds. In different studies, place attachment has been measured by different dimensions depending the type of the place. For example Dasgupta and his colleagues evaluated place attachment to the urban green spaces by place identity, place dependence, social bonding and nature bonding (Dasgupta et al., 2022) and Wachter assessed it in residential spaces by place identity, place dependence, social bonding and ambient bonding (Wachter, 2024)

A model of place attachment was designed for this study by considering two main ideas. 1) Existing studies which categorized place attachment into: place dependence (based on functional dimensions of the place) and place identity (based on cognitive and emotional

dimensions of the person to place relationship). 2) Behavioral bonds which refer to the effects of place attachment on individuals' responsible behavior. Hence, our model consists of four dimensions: functional, emotional, behavioral and cognitive bonds with a place (see figure's 2 table).

Dimension	Sentences
Functional	I enjoy spending time at Khayyam I get more satisfaction out of visiting Khayyam than any other public spaces I prefer public spaces like Khayyam I wouldn't substitute any other public spaces for Khayyam Khayyam is the first place that I elect for spending time at the city
Emotional	I feel being at home when I am at Khayyam Khayyam is my favorite public space I have a lot of memories about Khayyam I think People at Khayyam are similar to me. If it is possible I would come to Khayyam every day
Behavioral	I am ready for support maintenance of Khayyam financially I'll do my best for maintenance of Khayyam I think people have respectfully behavior at Khayyam
Cognitive	There are some special characteristics in Khayyam that differentiate it from other public When I think about Qazvin, first thing I remember, is Khayyam Khayyam have all characteristics of a good public space

Figure 2. Table of this study's model for surveying place attachment.

Different Aspects of a Successful Public Space

Comfort and security are two of the essential human needs in public spaces (Baba and Austin, 1989; Carr et al., 1992). Places that provide a sense of safety and security are more likely to be used. Also it is important that users feel a sense of psychological comfort. This is particularly true for elderly or lower income users. Generally, comfort refers to supporting the user's activities in public spaces, and security to protecting users against crime, vehicles and undesirable weather conditions (Gehl, 1987). Formal or informal surveillance or the programming of activities on the site may lessen fears concerning safety (Hester 1984).

Accessibility is another important factor in determining use in public spaces. If a site is inconvenient to go to it is less likely that it will be used. Likewise, if a site does not appear welcoming most will feel uncomfortable using it (Hester 1984). A successful public space is easy to get to and get through; it is visible both from a distance and up close. Accessible spaces have a high parking turnover and, ideally, are convenient to public transit (PPS.org), an appropriate location (Hester 1984), visual cues, and legibility (Carr, 1992) which help users to find different directions.

Natural elements, green space and water; not only impact on users' health and place satisfaction in public spaces, but also encourage them to participate in physical and social activities. Using local plants, color variety in different seasons, complexity, pavement, focal points, and organic design create and waterscapes such as fountains, water walls and sluices create more attractive (Moore, 1982; Ulrich, 1984; Parsons, 1991; Faber Taylor et al., 2001) and secure public spaces (Kweon et al., 1998).

Furthermore, **aesthetics values** in the design of public spaces create attractive places (Lo-kaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998) and some features like legibility, coherence (Lynch and

Hack, 1985) and beautiful natural views (Gehl, 1987) play key roles in achieving this aim. Visual qualities can improve, or may detract from, one's experience of place, for instance visual unity of paths will provide a visitor a better sense of the entire space (Hester 1984). Nasar (1994) categorizes aesthetic aspects into the following types:

1. Formal aesthetics which refers to form, rhythm, scale, complexity, color, lighting, order, hierarchy, space relations, and other similar factors which can be defined in three levels including enclosure, complexity and order;
2. Symbolic aesthetics, which refers to the meaning derived from type, function and style. It also relates to naturalness, upkeep, intensity of use and style;
3. Schemas aesthetics which refers to the typicality, familiarity or fitness to the knowledge structure. That means typicality explicitly deals with the interaction between the content of a place and the mind of the observer.

Many studies on public spaces show *amenities and facilities* will not only promote return visits but will also encourage people to stay in a place longer. Providing urban furniture such as benches, seating edges, multifunctional kiosks, recycling facilities, signs, services and vendors are essential elements in this case (Lokaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998).

Programming different activities such as daily and seasonal events, individual and public activities and finally active and passive engagement, not only affect the quality of place but also attract people to public spaces. In addition, such activities, active or passive cause places to be more livable (Gehl, 1987). Live performance events can help to enhance the productive potential of an urban space in multiple ways. Performance festivals can help enhance city life by turning urban spaces into cultural Places (Damrhung, 2025). In addition, the studies shows flow experience has a significant positive effect on place attachment, and the deeper the flow experience; the more likely it is to produce attachment to places. With a stronger flow experience, residents will be more actively involved in recreational activities and will develop a stronger attachment to various functions of the park, thus forming place attachment (Tao et al, 2022). Active engagement refers to direct personal experiences with places (Whyte, 1980) including activities such as jogging, recreation, sports, gathering, competition and other physical activities (Carr et al., 1992) and Passive engagement such as looking, hearing, resting, meeting and other similar activities (Carr et al., 1992) could lead to a sense of relaxation without active involvement.

Moreover, *social dimension (sociability)* is the most important feature of responsive public spaces. A sociable place is one where people want to go to observe the passing scene, meet friends, and celebrate interaction with a wide range of people that are different from themselves (PPS.org). Social activities based on Gehl's theory have a direct effect on place satisfaction and in creating responsive public spaces (Gehl, 1987). Another important feature of social dimension is the concept of inclusivity emphasizing on participating all citizens to urban daily life (Tachir and Nilay Evcil, 2022).

Finally, *meaning (connotative) dimension* is another important aspect of a responsive public space that depends on physical (Marcus and Sarkissian, 1986; Brower, 1988; Green, 1999), social and activity dimensions (Fried, 1963; Cohen and Shinar, 1985). Some mediators help developing meanings such as signs, history and cost of place and gathering spaces. In addition, the length of time, past experience and memories are very important to give meaning to a place for their users (Tuan, 1974; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1982; Prentice and Miller, 1992; Riley, 1992; Korpela and Hartig, 1996; Gifford, 2002).

Materials and Methods

As it has been shown in figure 3's table, four aspects of public spaces including: physical, social, meaning and social aspects; were evaluated in the study applying questionnaire technique. Firstly, physical aspect was evaluated by questioning participants' opinions and their evaluations about different physical dimensions of the case including: comfort and security, accessibility, natural elements, aesthetics values, and place amenities and facilities. Secondly, activity aspect were evaluated by questions evaluating personal and group presence in the place, place activity in all of its parts and all time, capacity of the place in supporting users' activity and existence of permanent users in the place. Thirdly, social aspect assesses existence of focal points, gathering spaces, social events and providing privacy and territory for users were evaluated. Then, meaning aspect was evaluated by questions referring sign, time and memory in the place (see below).

Physical aspect	Comfort and security		Protection against car	
			Protection against climate conditions	
			Protection against crime	
	Access		Place management and maintenance	
			Place location	
			Bicycle path	
			Different access alternatives	
			Pedestrian prominent	
	Natural elements		Relation to context	
			water	
	Aesthetic values		Green spaces	
			Formal	Complexity
Order				
Enclosure				
Symbolic			Maintenance	
			Permanent presence of people	
	Style			
Amenities and facilities		Benches, shelters, bus stop, waste bin		
Activity aspect	Variety of activities		Active engagement	
			Passive engagement	
	Activity satisfaction (protecting users' activities)			
	Active in all time		During day	
			During month	
			During year	
	Active in all parts			
	Permanent use of place			
	Group and individual presence			
Different social groups in the place				
Social aspect	Gathering spaces			
	Meeting friends in the place			
	Permanent users			
	Presence of children, women and elders			
	Social groups			
	Presence of different age groups			
	Introducing place to others			
	Social interactions in the place			
	Mood of people in the place			
Tendency to participate in the place				
Meaning aspect	Memories			
	Signs		Monuments	
			Special events	
			Meeting spaces	
			Special buildings	
	Time		Economic worth of the place	
			Length of familiarity with place	
			Permanent use of the place	
Age of place				

Figure 3. Table of this study's model for surveying different aspects of the public space.

In order to evaluate the degree of place attachment, as dependent indicator; Williams and Vaske (2003) developed a valid and reliable 12-item, 5-point Likert-scale place-attachment survey, initially used in recreational places but generalizable to other settings. Considering such existing studies, we designed a model of place attachment consisting four dimensions: functional, emotional, behavioral and cognitive bonds with a place (see figure 2). The results were analyzed by SPSS software applying Pearson correlation test and regression analysis.

Case Study

Khayyam Street is located in the center of Qazvin and has three main sections: northern, central, and southern. This street connects the new and old fabric of Qazvin. Khayyam Street is one of the oldest streets in Qazvin, which always invites a large number of citizens of this city to take a walk. In recent years, by building very large complexes, renovating different parts of its street edges, and building cafes, various shops, and restaurants, it has been able to attract more and more attention particularly the young people. This street is one of the few places where you can experience nightlife in the city at night. Among the city's numerous public spaces, such as parks, streets, squares, and the city's bazaar, this street is the most crowded public space that has attracted a diverse range of social groups.



Figure 4. Photos from Khayyam Street. Source: www.mehrnews.com.

Data collection

Data were collected from users of Khayyam Street and we interviewed with 598 participants in two groups, who had been selected through quota sampling, taking in to account the participants' age (between 14-80 years old), sex (51% female and 49% male), education and social class, see figure 5 below.

Social Character	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	N
Age	27.94	11.326	14	80	598
Marriage statue	.58	.494	0	1	598
Gender	.51	.500	0	1	598
Native	.70	.460	0	1	598
Education	12.70	3.030	0	20	598

Figure 5. Table of the social and demographics of the participants.

Group 1: Users who present at Khayyam

Our team was located in 5 areas of Khayyam and the interviews were carried out individually at different public spaces. The interviews took 15 minutes in average. Totally, 298 users were interviewed.

Group 2: Users who live in Qazvin city

In this group, we planned to interview with 300 participants. Therefore, first we prepare a map of different regions of the city. As this map consists of four regions, we calculated number of participants in each region based on its population (table in figure 6). Then divided each region equally based on number of participants that center of each part was interview location (figure 1).

Regions	Population	Participants Number
Region 1	93384	75
Region 2	69567	87
Region 3	102917	59
Region 4	88470	80
Total	35538	301

Figure 6. Table calculating number of participants in group 2.



Figure 7. Interview locations of region 2 in the city.

Results

First, the internal consistency of the scale used was calculated. The results indicated a high degree of reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 for the scale as a whole. Second, correlations between the different independent place indicators and place attachment have been examined (see the next 3 tables). Then, in order to explore how these indicators interact to each other and evaluate their degrees a path analysis has been applied (see Figure 11). The results are discussed in the following.

Activity aspect	Pearson Correlation	.227**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Physical aspect	Pearson Correlation	.348**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Place meaning	Pearson Correlation	.358**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Social aspects	Pearson Correlation	.570**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Figure 8. Table of the Pearson correlation results of the four main aspects of the public space.

comfort and Security	Pearson Correlation	.082*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.046
Accessibility	Pearson Correlation	.103*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012
Aesthetics values	Pearson Correlation	.519**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Natural Factors	Pearson Correlation	.112**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006
Facilities	Pearson Correlation	.179**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Different activity	Pearson Correlation	.398**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Activity Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	.147**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Active in all parts	Pearson Correlation	-.084*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.042
Personal and Group presence	Pearson Correlation	-.035
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.391
Active in all times	Pearson Correlation	-.039
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.344
Permanent use	Pearson Correlation	.333**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Social Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation	.570**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Signs	Pearson Correlation	.212**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Length of time	Pearson Correlation	.391**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Memories	Pearson Correlation	.181**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 9. Table of the Pearson correlation results in different indicators with place attachment.

Correlations between users' assessments about four aspects of the public space and the degree of their place attachment were evaluated applying Pearson correlation exam (Figure 8). The result show: first, all of physical, social, meaning and activity aspects have had positive significance correlation with place attachment. Second, by comparison with other aspects, social aspect has the highest correlation with users' attachment (Pearson correlation =.570++). However, the lowest correlation belongs to activity aspect (Pearson correlation =0.227++). Further investigations on different evaluated indicators in four mentioned dimensions show us aesthetics values among physical aspect, variety of activities among activity aspect and spent time among meaning aspect have the most significant correlation with attachment degree.

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.142	.301		3.793	.000
Physical aspect	.367	.055	.227	6.633	.000
Activity aspect	-.034	.044	-.028	-.766	.444
Social aspect	.342	.029	.481	11.680	.000
Place meaning	.069	.037	.075	1.857	.064

Dependent Variable: Place Attachment

F=87.849
Significance=0.00

Figure 10. Table of the first regression analyses model applied for four main aspects of the public space.

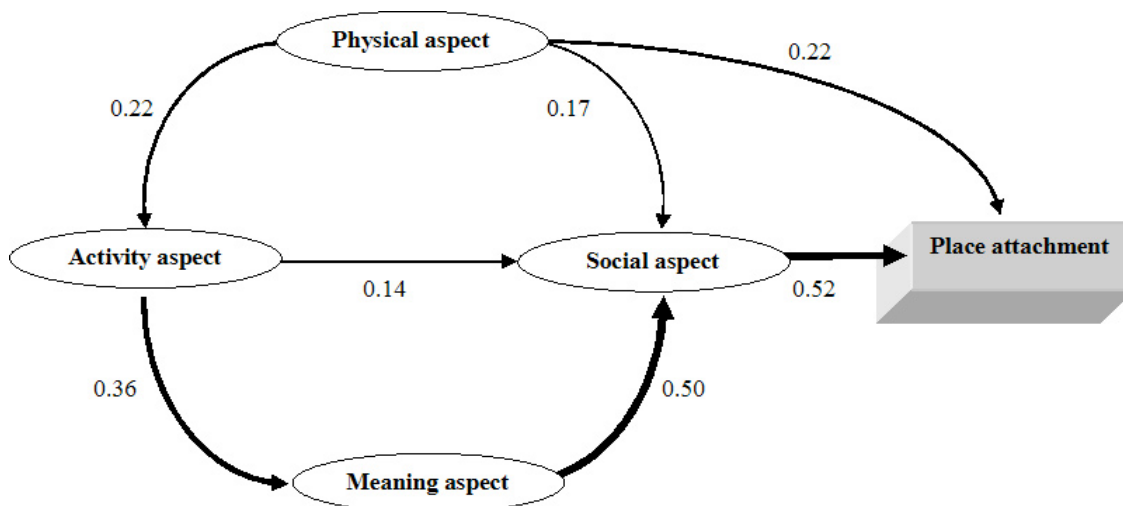


Figure 11. Path analysis results.

Finally, in order to compare the significance of relations between the different the place indicators and the degree of place attachment we applied several regression analyses models. Regarding the result (see figure 10), we can claim that place attachment is strongly affected by social aspects ($T=11.680++$). Second model of regression analyses ($R^2= 0/476$) shows aesthetics values, variety of activities, social aspect, signs in the place and spent time are the most significant indicators (figure 12). Compared with other indicators, aesthetics value has the highest degree. Also, as it has been shown in the figure 13's table, final regression analyses ($R^2= 0/420$) emphasize on role of aesthetics values as a main indicator affecting place attachment.

Model		Coefficients			t	Sig.
		Unstandardized		Standardized		
		Coefficients		Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-7.209	3.814		-1.890	.059
	Comfort and Security	.020	.054	.011	.366	.714
	Accessibility	-.300	.196	-.047	-1.533	.126
	Aesthetic values	.614	.054	.362	11.467	.000
	Natural elements	.250	.352	.021	.710	.478
	Amenities and Facilities	.131	.332	.012	.395	.693
	Variety of activities	.796	.238	.107	3.346	.001
	Protecting from activities	.787	.861	.028	.914	.361
	Active in all parts	-2.002	.726	-.081	-2.757	.006
	Presence of groups	-.740	.568	-.038	-1.303	.193
	Active in all times	-.214	.342	-.019	-.627	.531
	Permanent presence	.033	.551	.004	.061	.952
	Social aspect	.927	.096	.380	9.636	.000
	Signs in place	.539	.233	.071	2.310	.021
	Spent time	.787	.311	.180	2.532	.012
Memories	-.130	.341	-.012	-.382	.703	

a. Dependent Variable: Place Attachment

Figure 12. Table of the second model of regression analyses applied for different place indicators.

As it can be seen from the results, users' evaluation about activity dimension has not had significance relation with their attachments to the place (P value > 0.05). Therefore, to explain this result; path analysis was applied as well. This analysis illustrated in Figure 2 indicates how these four dimensions interact to each other in relation to the degree of place attachment. It also shows activity dimension impacts on the degree of users' attachment by affecting social and activity dimensions. As it can be seen in figure 2, social aspect that is mostly affected by place meaning; has the highest relation with the attachment degree. Moreover, the result indicates physical dimension not only enhances the degree of user's attachment directly but also influences on social and activity dimensions.

Coefficients					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-11.089	3.050		-3.636	.000
Aesthetic values	.665	.050	.386	13.383	.000
Variety of activities	.901	.226	.122	3.991	.000
Social aspect	.906	.087	.372	10.363	.000
Signs in place	.638	.141	.153	4.524	.000
Spent time	.528	.219	.069	2.417	.016

a. Dependent Variable: Place Attachment

Figure 13. Table of the final model of regression analyses.

Conclusion

Alongside with some existing studies like Eisenhauer et al (2000) and Williams & Stewart's (1998); the results indicate the place carrying meaning for its users leads them to have more attachment to it. These results also indicate users' positive evaluations of the

place physical and activity aspects attach people to the place. In the same way, the study confirms social dimensions of the place are the most important factor increasing place attachment.

In contrast to similar studies, such as Hummon (1992), Moore and Graefe (1994) and Bricker and Kerstetter (2000); the result of regression analysis indicates activity aspect dose not directly effect on the degree of place attachment. However, path analysis confirms that meaning and activity aspects increase users' attachment to place by means of affecting social and meaning aspects. So, we can conclude although social aspect is the most important factor predicting the degree of place attachment it is affected by physical, activity and meaning aspects. To conclude we can summarize the results, which will be discussed in the following.

Firstly, although all aspects of a public space have direct impact on place attachment those aspects have different effect. Physical aspect not only has the significant effect on attachment degree but significant effect on other activity and social aspects as well. However, social aspect that has the most significant impact on attachment degree is affected by other aspects and mainly by activity aspect. This result shows formation of users' attachment depends on the process based on physical potential of space, its activities and time.

Secondly, among different effective indicators of the space: physical (aesthetic values, comfort and security and accessibility), activity (variety of activities, activity satisfaction and permanent use) and meaning (signs, time and memories); three indicators affecting on the users' attachment were aesthetic values, variety of activity and time.

Thirdly, as it can be seen in figure 3, attaching citizens to public spaces by providing different activities, as a key indicator; will be insufficient and some aesthetic consideration should be taken into consideration.

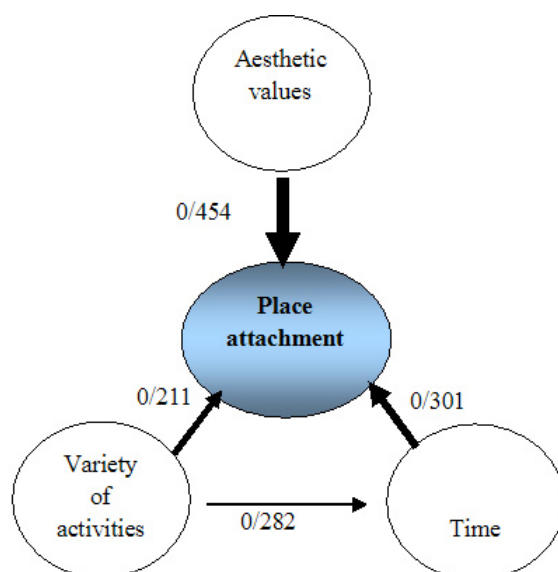


Figure 14. Illustration of the main significant indicators in user's attachment to public space.

To sum up, it can be claimed different kinds of indicators play role to determine attachment degree. Main indicators, aesthetic values and variety of activity; which directly increase users' attachment. Another key indicator is spent time in place, which can intensify

sense of attachment to the place in a process. In this process, aesthetic values invite people to present in the place and variety of activities involve them during time (see Figure 3). This result confirms the similar study like Ariannia and her colleagues, which showed a positive correlation between form and place attachment mediated through visual quality. By formation such process and place potential to protect users' activities they develop positive interaction with the place and some memories are formed. In addition, primary analyses emphasize on some basic design considerations such as: accessibility, signs in the place and comfort and security; which facilitate that process.

Finally, for further studies to control the generalizability of the results; repetition the similar study in different type of urban public spaces and different context (different geographical and cultural situations) is strongly recommended. Furthermore, considering the significance of aesthetics values as a key factor; future studies could more deeply focus on this variable and its different aspects to introduce design guidelines to create the public spaces, which could attach their users successfully.

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The Battle Spirit: The Cultural Es- sence of Buddhist Temple Murals *in Northeast Thailand*

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Abstract

The murals found in Buddhist temples across Thailand play a significant role in the country's social fabric and are integral to the safeguarding efforts of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage. The research aims to explore the essence of murals in 24 Buddhist temples in Isan, delving into the principles guiding their creation. The author explores the intrinsic meanings embedded in these murals and deconstructs the cultural essence of Isan through a qualitative study. The investigation reveals the core essence of Isan's murals as the “battle spirit,” intricately woven across individual, societal, and national levels. Serving as conduits for Buddhist teachings on an individual scale, these murals reflect moral struggles between good and evil. Societally, they mirror diverse ethnic cultures, fortifying identity in a “battle of consciousness.” Nationally, they exemplify Intangible Cultural Heritage, contributing to soft power competition. From an international standpoint, they are integral to the ongoing global “battle” for cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Northeast Thailand, Murals, Cultural Identity, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Buddhist Art*

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Introduction

Thai murals encapsulate the fundamental tenets of Theravada Buddhism, serving as conduits for imparting Buddhist teachings and shaping the conduct of believers. Within Theravada cosmology, there exist the “three worlds,” (ไตรภูมิ, *traiphum*) and the destinies of sentient beings in these realms are dictated by the karma (กรรม, *kam*) and merits (บุญ, *bun*) accrued in their past lives.¹ It is a common belief that most sentient beings undergo cyclic rebirths within these three worlds.

The pivotal determinant influencing reincarnation in Theravada Buddhism is merit. The more merit and virtues that one accumulates in the world, the benefits extend beyond the individual to encompass relatives and friends in their subsequent rebirths. Consequently, the interplay of merit, karma, and reincarnation forms the foundational world view of Theravada Buddhism, profoundly shaping the conduct of Thai individuals across various facets of life. Consequently, the practice of “merit-making” (ทำบุญ, *thambun*) has emerged as a significant aspect of Theravada Buddhism within Thai society. Numerous events within Buddhist temples, including the creation of palm leaf manuscripts and the painting of murals, are intrinsically connected by the ethos of merit (Pornsawan Amaranonta, 2008: 41). These activities have given rise to crucial symbols within Theravada temples, particularly in murals, which are imbued with profound religious, literary, and humanistic values, making them of paramount importance for scholarly research.

Thai murals serve as expressions of local cultures. Muralists, which include monks, artists, and painters, create these murals by drawing inspiration from Buddhist teachings, local customs, legends, and personal beliefs in honoring Buddhist temples. However, the introduction of Western science during the reigns of King Rama IV (A.D.1851-1868) and King Rama V (A.D.1868-1910) had a profound impact on the cosmology of Thai Buddhism and altered the context in which murals were produced. In particular, the murals of Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand, a region that is also called Isan, were influenced by the general environment as well as ethnic factors; this makes Isan’s murals distinctive among Thailand’s regional cultures.

Compared with central Thailand, the murals in Isan exhibit clear differences in the expression of visual language and themes, giving rise to distinctive local characteristics. Relevant discussions are explored by Brereton (2010:187-190), Pimwadee (2014:3-4), and Noivan-gklang (2006:293-294). Through content analysis, Brereton et al. established that Isan’s murals are deemed ‘unique’ due to the distinctive styles of the painters (Pimwadee, 2014:4; Brereton, 2010:19). However, these assessments often overlook the dynamic interactions between the murals and their surroundings and neglect a thorough examination of the environment’s influence on muralists.

For instance, the Laotian ethnic group (also referred to as Lao) extends across the border between Isan and Northern Laos, forming the majority population in this region. Although local murals have traditionally depicted motifs rooted in Laotian cultural traditions, such representations are seldom addressed in studies focusing on Isan. In particular, while the Laotians constitute the dominant ethnic group in both Thailand and Laos – and simultaneously a transborder people – the ways in which murals reinforce ethnic boundaries be-

tween the two nations have rarely been examined. Consequently, the study of Isan murals extends beyond purely aesthetic interpretation to encompass social issues concerning ethnic and cultural identity. In essence, while Isan's murals are unique, the question arises as to what distinct local features they embody. Is there a consistent cultural phenomenon substantial enough to formulate plausible arguments about the production process of Isan's frescoes, thereby affirming their distinctive local characteristics? This constitutes the central inquiry of this paper.

Building upon the aforementioned research question, the author conducted fieldwork from 2017 to 2019, involving multiple visits to Isan to identify the creation rules governing Isan murals. The author divided the region into three areas: the Mekong River, central, and southern zones (see Figure 1). Data were collected from murals in 24 Buddhist temples (see Figure 2) located in the provinces of Loei, Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Udon Ratchathani, Khon Kaen, Roi Et, and Nakhon Ratchasima. The collected materials comprised 22 murals, one cave mural, and one scroll painting (มวนฝาพะเทวด, muan pha phathewat) used as texts for analysis. This paper focuses on the rules governing the creation of these murals based on their themes and content. It should be noted that aesthetic aspects such as composition, form, line drawing techniques, and color are not the main focus of this textual analysis, which constitutes a limitation of the present study.

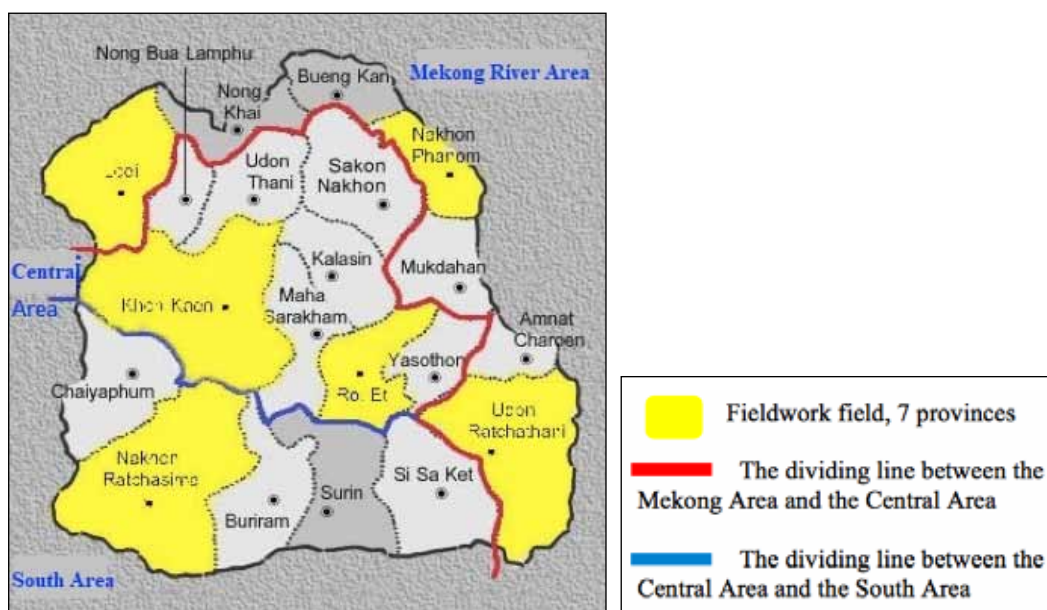


Figure 1. Map of the study area where the fieldwork was conducted.

Area	Province	Subdistrict and district (in Thai)	Buddhist temple	Buddhist temple (in Thai)	Year of production	Type of mural	Religious theme(s)	Other themes	Features of Northeast Thailand
South	Nakhon Ratchasima	พิกุลบึง b. lio:wa:rra:rra:rra:rra:rra	Wat Sakae	วัดสระ	1687	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
		พิกุลบึง b. lio:wa:rra:rra:rra:rra	Wat Pa Sala Wan	วัดพระธาตุ	1932	Mural			
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Sa La Loi	วัดสาม	1939	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
		พิกุลบึง							
		พิกุลบึง							
Central	Khon Kaen	พิกุลบึง	Wat Saman Phrahararam	วัดสามพระอาราม	1922	Mural	Vessantara	Sinsai story	Vessantara Festival, Lao literature
		พิกุลบึง							
		พิกุลบึง							
		พิกุลบึง							
		พิกุลบึง							
Mekong River	Ubon Ratchathani	พิกุลบึง	Wat Kiang Ming Muang	วัดเชียงเมือง	1541	Mural	Bhuridatta Jataka		Naga worship
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Nua	วัดนุ	1805	Mural	Three worlds	Local history and traditional festival	Isan folklore
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Tai Pirachao Yai Ong Tue	วัดพระธาตุยาคู	1889	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales		Vessantara Festival
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Liab	วัดเลียบ	1895	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales	Traditional festival	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Thung Muang	วัดทุ่งเมือง	1813	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha,	Traditional festival	
	Nakhon Phanom	พิกุลบึง	Wat Mahabhat	วัดมหา	607	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales, Phra Mahat's Journeys to Hell		Vessantara Festival
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Okat	วัดเอก	1451	Mural		The Naga protects the Buddha on Mekong river	Naga worship
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Srithep Praditharam	วัดศรีเทพประดิษฐาราม	1859	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Vessantara	Portraits of the Kings of Thailand	Vessantara Festival
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Hua Wang Rangsi	วัดหัววังรังสี	1917	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Bhuridatta Jataka	Ramakien	Naga worship
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Aranyikawat	วัดอารยิกาวาส	1929	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
	Nong Khai	พิกุลบึง	Wat Thai	วัดไทย	1777	Cave mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha	Various Naga stories	Naga worship, Isan folklore
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Pho Chai	วัดโพธิ์ชัย	1817	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka tales, Three worlds	Various Naga stories, Naga frebals festival	Vessantara Festival, Naga worship, Isan folklore
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Srikumuang	วัดศรีकुเมือง	1827	Mural	Ten Jataka Tales		Vessantara Festival
		พิกุลบึง	Phra That Kiang Nam	พระธาตุคางน้ำ	1857	Mural	New Buddha images		
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Sa Kaeo	วัดสระเกศ	1857	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha		
Loei		พิกุลบึง	Wat Si Phum	วัดสี่พระยา	1552	Scroll painting	Vessantara		Vessantara Festival
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Phon Chai	วัดพนมชัย	1560	Mural	Ten Jataka Tales	Naga murals	Vessantara Festival
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Maha That	วัดมหาธาตุ	1654	Mural	The enlightenment of the Buddha, Ten Jataka Tales	Ramakien, Traditional festival	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Srikhumuang	วัดศรีकुเมือง	1656	Mural	Ten Jataka Tales, Vessantara	Traditional festival	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore
		พิกุลบึง	Wat Nemanit Wipatsana	วัดเนรมิตวิปัสสนา	1982	Mural	Ten Jataka Tales	Naga murals	Vessantara Festival

Figure 2. Data on the murals of Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand. Source: National Office of Buddhism. Collated by the author.

Literature Review

According to Chunlathat Phayakharanon, murals are regarded as a form of national art in Thailand, embodying the characteristics and style of “Thai-ness” (ความเป็นไทย, *khwam pen thai*) (Phayakharanon, 1983:255). Rooted in the spirit of merit-making, murals have come to serve as a symbolic embodiment of temple art. They not only enhance the aesthetic quality of sacred spaces but also reinforce the spiritual significance of merit. Consequently, the act of viewing murals generates an interactive cognitive cycle among the artwork, the devotee, and the concept of merit. This literature review is organized into three sections: the first examines the historical development of Thai murals; the second discusses the current state of research on Isan murals; and the third explores how mural themes in Northeast Thailand reveal the interrelationship between mural art and Isan culture.

The Development of Thai Murals

In terms of location, Thai murals can be categorized as those found on rocks, in caves, pagodas, and Buddhist temples. Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci) was among the first scholars to conduct a systematic survey of murals in Thailand. Commencing in 1957, he led a research team of painters in a comprehensive effort to document, photograph, and preserve murals across the country. This initiative compiled data on 25 ancient murals spanning more than a thousand years, from 13 provinces and representing diverse historical periods – including the Dvaravati, Srivijaya, Sukhothai, and Ayutthaya eras, as well as the Thonburi and Rattanakosin periods (Bhirasri, 1959:3, 7-12). In total, the study recorded one mural from the Dvaravati era, one from the Srivijaya era, two from the Sukhothai era, ten from the Ayutthaya era, one from the Thonburi era, and ten from the Rattanakosin era.

As far as the murals of Buddhist temples and pagodas are concerned, Bhirasri’s findings indicate that those from the Sukhothai period are the earliest surviving examples. For instance, the Jataka engravings on the stone walls of the hidden tunnel (อุโมงค์, *umong*) at Wat Si Chum (วัดศรีชุม) in Sukhothai Province date back more than 700 years. Unfortunately, due to the passage of time, very few murals from the Sukhothai period remain apart from those at Wat Si Chum. In contrast, a greater number of ancient murals from the Ayutthaya period have survived. One notable example is the stupa murals at Wat Yai Suwan-naram (วัดใหญ่สุวรรณาราม) in Phetchaburi Province (Figure 3).

Despite the prosperity of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, it ultimately fell to Burmese invasion, which resulted in the destruction of much of its cultural heritage. The subsequent Thonburi Kingdom lasted only fourteen years, ending in 1782. Consequently, the Bangkok (Rattanakosin) Kingdom stands out for its abundance of surviving murals. For example, the Grand Palace (พระบรมมหาราชวัง) was constructed during the reign of King Rama I (A.D. 1782–1809), who commissioned palace muralists to depict the “Three Worlds,” including stories of the Jataka and the Buddha, in Wat Phra Kaeo (วัดพระแก้ว). Moreover, 178 murals illustrating episodes from the Ramakien (Figure 4) adorn the inner walls of the Grand Palace – an enduring masterpiece of Thai visual art.



Figure 3. The mural of Yaisuwannaram Temple, Phetchaburi Province. Photo by the author.



Figure 4. Hanuman pursues mermaid Suvannamaccha, The Grand Palace in Bangkok. Photo by the author.

The influence of Buddhism on Thai art dates back to the Sukhothai period. During this era, monks may have been the earliest Thai artists, laying the foundations for various art forms, including mural painting. Many important Thai artworks were created not for aesthetic enjoyment but for religious and missionary purposes (Bovornkitti, 2005:356). Notably, the relationship between murals and Buddhist sculptures is particularly significant. Bhirsari, in his analysis, compared the line compositions and decorative motifs of Thai paintings with those of Buddhist sculptures, suggesting that the stylistic development of Thai painting may have been profoundly influenced by sculptural forms (Feroci, 1952:148).

Regarding the relationship between Buddhist statues and paintings in Thailand, it is important to note that Buddhist statues predate the Sukhothai Kingdom, whereas the use of paintings to propagate the Buddhist faith likely began during the Sukhothai or Ayutthaya

periods (cf. Feroci, 1952:147; Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1968:2). Chronologically, the development of Thai Buddhist statues precedes that of paintings, making it reasonable to infer that the Sangha may have used statues as templates for painting. This practice would have established conventions for artistic creation, including the depiction of figures and painting techniques. Consequently, the forms, styles, and lines of statues naturally influenced paintings, including murals, a notion supported by Bhirasri's research.

Bhirasri emphasized the primacy of lines in Thai painting, asserting that the quality of a work depends entirely on the lines, including their thickness, shape, and color. By comparing lines and decorative patterns in Thai paintings with those of Buddhist statues, he highlighted the sculptural influence, revealing features of Indian, Khmer, and Sukhothai-style graphic modeling across different periods. This influence persisted into modern times, eventually intersecting with the impact of Western art on Thai murals (Feroci, 1952:148-150, 153-154). Furthermore, Bhirasri observed notable similarities in composition and color techniques between certain murals and illustrations in ancient Thai manuscripts, leading to the inference of a connection between the murals and ancient illustrations (Feroci, 1952:150-151).

In summary, Thai Buddhist temple murals reflect the characteristics of their respective periods, with their development closely tied to the surrounding environment. As Bhirasri's research demonstrates that the form, composition, and color palette of traditional murals could have been shaped by the influence of earlier Buddhist statues or ancient illustrations, it ultimately stemmed from artists' observation and imitation of their environment. The interrelationship between artistic creation and the environment is evident not only in murals shaped by sculptural influence but also in later sculptures that emulate mural imagery. Piriya Krairiksh, in his study of Thai Buddhist sculpture, highlights HRH Prince Krom-maphra Paramanujit Jinoros (กรมพระปรมาภิไธยวชิราวุธ, A.D. 1790-1853) who was inspired by the Buddha's historical narratives and designed thirty-seven distinct postures for Buddha images. During the same period, artists drew from contemporary murals, resulting in the creation of numerous small bronze Buddha statues (Krairiksh, 2008: 504, 525). In this light, any examination of Isan murals must take environmental factors into account to better understand the interconnections between murals and other elements of their surroundings. The topic of mural-environment relationships will be further explored in the following discussion.

The Study of Isan's Murals

Buddhist temples in Thailand consist of groups of buildings, including the image hall of the Buddha (วิหาร, wihan), the ordination hall (พระอุโบสถ, phra ubosot), the stupa (เจดีย์/ปรางค์, chedi/ prang), The hall (ศาลา, sala), the bell tower (หอระฆัง, horrakhang), the library (หอไตร, hotrai), and the house where monks live (กุฏิ, kuti) (Döhning, 2000:17; Phayakharon, 2012:1-5). The image hall serves as the primary worship space in the temple, where believers engage in the veneration of the Buddha and perform meritorious deeds. In contrast, the ordination hall is specifically dedicated to monks' practice and the observance of precepts. A noteworthy architectural distinction between the image and ordination halls is the presence of "bai sema," (ใบเสมา) a stone used to demarcate sacred areas; typically, it is positioned around the ordination hall (Döhning, 2000:32).

The ordination hall is referred to by various names in different regions. In Isan, for instance, it is known as "sim" (ลิม) in the local dialect. The term "sim" originates from Pali, signifying "border." Isan's sim structures are constructed on either land or water. (Samosorn, 1989:258-259; Nimlek, 2006:17-32). To enhance their sanctity, locals have adorned the inner and outer walls of these structures with murals since ancient times, a practice less common in other parts of Thailand (see Figure 5). This uniqueness has made sim an integral element of Isan's cultural landscape (Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010:9-12).

Traditionally, due to the narrow interiors of sim, women were prohibited from entering to avoid influencing monks during Buddhist services. However, such restrictions no longer apply. In efforts to educate women, murals have been painted on the outer walls of sim since ancient times (cf. Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010:5, 9, 12; Bovornkitti, 2005:360; Nimlek, 2006:17-18). Over time, this practice has evolved into a local custom in Northeast Thailand.

The murals of Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand can be classified into two categories: scroll paintings and wall murals. Although these art forms differ in technique – painting on cotton versus painting on walls – both embody the Buddhist concept of merit-making. In Isan, scroll paintings are closely associated with local festivals, most notably the Vessantara Festival (บุญพระเวส, bun phrawet), which is celebrated across Northeast and Northern Thailand as well as Northern Laos. Traditionally, scroll paintings depicting the Vessantara Jataka or other Jataka tales were indispensable to these festivities. During the festival, villagers paraded the scrolls through their communities, displaying them as part of the ritual celebration (cf. Brereton, 2010:190; Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:660; Lefferts, 2006/2007:149-152).

Upon the conclusion of the ceremony, the scrolls were hung within temple precincts, serving as murals to sanctify the sacred space (see Figure 6). However, as permanent temple murals became increasingly popular, the production of scroll paintings gradually declined. Today, only a few villages in Isan continue the tradition of processional scrolls (Brereton, 2010:190), marking a significant transformation in the formal development of Isan's mural art.



Figure 5. Sim murals in Northeast Thailand, Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, Khon Kaen Province. Photo by the author.



Figure 6. The scroll painting hanging in the ordination hall, Wat Si Phum, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

The study of Isan's murals commenced in the late 1980s when Khon Kaen University began presenting papers on the subject, drawing attention from the academic community (Yan-pisit, 2017:163-164). Pairote Samosorn and his team gained prominence for their research project, the 'Investigation of Isan Murals,' conducted in 1982, as a collaborative 5-year effort between Khon Kaen University and the Toyota Foundation of Japan. The research team gathered 11 murals in Isan for analysis and identified their uniqueness, indicating that Isan's folk customs and festivals often appear in the paintings. Samosorn stressed the importance of Buddhist temple murals as Isan's cultural heritage that warrants protection (Samosorn, 1989:11-13; 115; 151-154; 297-304).

Afterward, Noivangklang (2006) conducted a study focusing on the two major basins in the Nakhon Ratchasima Plateau – the Sakhon Nakhon and Nakhon Ratchasima basins – using geographic boundaries. The analysis involved murals from 17 Buddhist temples across 17 provinces, exploring the themes of Isan's murals. Noivangklang divided Isan's murals into three styles: dharma, Thai-Isan and Rattanakosin according to the painter's style (Noivangklang, 2006:283, 296). Although Noivangklang does not clearly define the three styles of murals, he highlights the differences in Isan's mural styles.

Brereton, a scholar specializing in mural research in Northeast Thailand, conducted an analysis of the murals within three sim structures located in Khon Kaen Province, central Isan, in 2010 (Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010; Brereton, 2010). Subsequently, over the next few years, she authored a series of papers focusing on the stylistic elements and literary characteristics of murals in Northeast Thailand. In her cross-disciplinary research, in addition to image analysis, she addresses the ethnic literature of murals and the history of Isan (Brereton, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

Among other Thai scholars, Kittanut Yanpisit has traced the development of research on Isan murals in 2017 and 2023. In 2017, he analyzed studies from the 1960s to 2016, dividing them into five periods and noting that research on Isan murals had become increasingly diverse and in-depth (Yanpisit, 2017:161-171). Building on this work, Yanpisit (2023) further expanded his discussion of the development of Isan mural research and framed these murals as valuable local cultural heritage from the perspective of the “creative economy.” He examined how policies could integrate murals with cultural tourism, education, and the creative industries, thereby enhancing their social and economic significance (Yanpisit, 2023:6-15).

Meanwhile, Pimwadee Eomthurapote (2014) scrutinized sim murals in Isan based on Plato’s representation theory, noting that murals serve as tools to comprehend Buddhist cosmology and explain how people connect the real and material worlds. Subsequently, several books focusing on sim murals were successively published, including works by Prasasvinitchai (2010) and Atipatayakul (2013), contributing to increased interest in Isan’s murals.

In terms of studies spanning nearly four decades, except for Brereton, most of the research on Isan’s murals is grounded in content analysis. Although some studies mention regional elements, they do not discuss the relationship between murals and regional culture, ignoring the interaction between the murals and the environment. Therefore, summarizing the rules of mural creation based on the specific characteristics of Isan’s murals becomes challenging, and this constitutes the research objective of this paper.

Themes of Isan’s Murals

The historian cannot help dividing his material into ‘periods,’ nicely defined in the Oxford Dictionary as ‘distinguishable portions of history.’ To be distinguishable, each of these portions has to have a certain unity; and if the historian wishes to verify this unity instead of merely presupposing it, he must try to discover intrinsic analogies between such overtly disparate phenomena as the arts, literature, philosophy, social and political currents, religious movements, etc. (Panofsky 1957:1).

The themes depicted in murals are often closely linked to local culture. The concentration of a particular mural style in a given location can be attributed to the underlying cultural context, frequently shaped by local artists and the broader cultural milieu. As Panofsky noted, the defining characteristics of a period should be consistent across its various artistic expressions. Accordingly, the coherence of Isan culture is reflected in the thematic elements portrayed in its murals.

Popular mural themes also exhibit regional variations. Narratives such as the Three Worlds, Ten Jataka Tales (ทศชาติชาดก, thotsachat chadok), and Phra Malai’s Journeys to Hell (พระมาลัย ท่องแดนนรก, phra malai thong daen narok) are widespread across Thailand. In particular, the dramatic portrayal of the Rama epic is especially prominent in central Thailand, whereas the Vessantara Jataka, which emphasizes the virtue of generosity, is more strongly represented in Northeast Thailand (Brereton and Yencheuy, 2010:30; Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:651-652). In the following paragraph, several recurring themes identified in murals are discussed.

Ten Jataka Tales

The Ten Jataka Tales originate from Theravada scripture and revolves around the Buddha's preceding births in both human and animal forms. Within these narratives, the future Buddha manifests as a king, an outcast, a deva, or an animal. Regardless of the form he assumes, he exemplifies a virtue as indicated by the respective story. According to the scripture, there are more than 500 Jataka stories in total, and Thai Sangha chose the last Ten Jataka Tales as models of practice (see Figure 7), representing ten virtues that are also known as ten paramis (สิบบารมี) (see Figure 8).



Figure 7. Ten Jataka Tales, Wat Maha That, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

No.	Thai	English	Virtue	Popular in Isan
1	เตมิยชาดก	Temiya Jaataka	renunciation	
2	มหาชนกชาดก	Mahaajanaka Jaataka	energy	
3	สุวรรณสามชาดก	Suva.n.nasaama Jaataka	loving kindness	
4	เนมิราชชาดก	Nemiraaja Jaataka	resolution	
5	มโหสถชาดก	Candakumaara Jaataka	wisdom	
6	ภูริทัตชาดก	Bhuuridatta Jaataka	morality	✓ A Naga story
7	จันทกุมารชาดก	Mahaanaarakassapa Jaataka	patience	
8	มหาพรหมนรทักสพลชาดก	Pu.n.naka Jaataka	equanimity	
9	วิรุทธชาดก	Mahosadha Jaataka	truthfulness	
10	มหาเวสสันดรชาดก	Vessandara Jaataka	generosity	✓ Vessantara Festival

Figure 8. List of Ten Jataka Tales Reference. Source: Collated by the author.

While the Ten Jataka Tales are documented in Buddhist scripture, they maintain a long-standing connection with the social memory and ancestral history of the Laotian people residing along the border of Thailand and Laos. This has contributed to their popularity in the Isan region. For Laotians, the Ten Jataka Tales serve not only as a cultural feature but also as a significant reference for the creation of Laotian literature and art (Pranee, 1989:28).

Two stories in Ten Jataka Tales are especially popular in Isan: Bhuridatta Jataka (ภุริทัตตชาดก), which features Prince Naga as the protagonist; the other is Vessantara Jataka (เวสสันดร มหาชาดก). Because the locals of Isan believe that the Naga, with special magic power, lives in the Mekong River, Bhuridatta Jataka is especially loved by Isan's residents (see Figure 9). Regarding Vessantara Jataka, since the Vessantara Festival holds significant importance for Laotians, the related story circulates in Northeast Thailand. According to Vessantara Jataka, the Buddha was Prince Vessantara in a previous life. Vessantara diligently practices generosity, considered the greatest kindness created by the Buddha in all his lifetimes. He eliminates his ego and relinquishes everything, including a sacred white elephant, his two children, and his beautiful wife, to attain the highest level of generosity.

The Laotians of Isan divide the story into 13 sections and represent it through 13 images during the Vessantara Festival (see Figure 10). They believe that attending the temple to listen to the story of Vessantara during the festival will accumulate merit, leading to a better afterlife. In view of this, Vessantara Jataka is commonly featured in scroll paintings or murals within Isan's temples.



Figure 9. Part of Bhuridatta Jataka, Wat Hua Wiang Rangsi, Nakhon Phanom Province. Photo by the author.



Figure 10. Thirteen pictures of Vessantara Jataka, Wat Phon Chai, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell

Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell is a story described in the three worlds from the Thai standpoint (see Figure 11). There are many legends surrounding its origin. Thais believe that it originated in northern Thailand in the 15th century and spread to central Thailand in the 17th century. Since then, it has become a story known in every household (cf. Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:658-659; Matics, 1979:38). It is said that the hell of the three worlds is gloomy and terrifying, and the dead are judged. The image of evil ghosts in hell resembles a person with a slender neck, a big mouth, and a large belly. Not only can this figure not eat, but it also experiences a cycle of death and suffering in hot and cold hells. Escape from such a spiritual realm is impossible until the karma of the deceased is eliminated. Since Phra Malai's story is instrumental in understanding Buddhist cosmology, temples often draw series of murals described in the book to educate believers.

Ramayana

The Ramayana is an Indian epic that was introduced into Southeast Asia and evolved into several versions. King Rama I rewrote the Ramayana into the Ramakien, which became a traditional script for Thai drama. As Ramakien is a royal work, the murals of the Grand Palace in Bangkok are based on it. Correspondingly, the Ramayana theme is fairly common in the decorations of Buddhist temples in central Thailand (see Figure 12).

The aforementioned themes are all depicted in Isan's murals, and different themes convey distinct cultural meanings. The majority of murals are deeply rooted in cultural contexts, with only a few being entirely imaginary. Isan's temple murals are shaped by religious, ethnic, and political influences. The guidelines governing mural creation can be observed at the individual, societal, and national levels. While artists may not always be consciously aware of these cultural contexts during the creative process, they serve as carriers of culture. Therefore, when muralists in Isan create art, their cultural background and ideology become manifest alongside the content of their murals. In what follows, the author delves into the inherent rules guiding mural creation in Isan, aiming to comprehend the interaction between murals and the environment, and subsequently deconstruct Isan's culture.



Figure 11. Part of Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell, Wat Mahathat, Nakhon Phanom Province. Photo by the author.

The Creation Rules of Isan Murals

The field data is outlined in Figure 2, indicating that the majority of murals in Isan's temples are associated with religious themes, as these murals serve as conveyors of Buddhist teachings. A closer examination reveals that 71% (17 out of 24) of Buddhist temples

have skillfully integrated the Vessantara Festival, Naga worship, Lao literature, and Isan folklore into their murals, creating distinctive local characteristics. The structures of these themes illustrate the features of Isan's murals, encompassing religious, ethnic, and historical elements, and embodying the 'spirit of battle,' which is interconnected at the individual, societal, and national levels. The author organizes this information in Figure 13's table and provides further explanation.



Figure 12. Ramakien mural, Wat Maha That, Loei Province. Photo by the author.

Province	Buddhist temple	Features of Northeastern Thailand	Battle of Spirit (individual)	Battle of Consciousness (society)	Battle of ICH (country)
Nakhon Ratchasima	Wat Sakae		✓		
	Wat Pa Sala Wan		✓		
	Wat Sa La Loi		✓		
Khon Kaen	Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram	Vessantara Festival, Lao literature	✓	✓	✓
Roi Et	Wat Klang Ming Mueang	Naga worship	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Nua	Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
Ubon Ratchathani	Wat Tai Phrachao Yai Ong Tue	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Liab	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Thung Si Mueang		✓	✓	✓
Nakhon Phanom	Wat Mahathat	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Okat	Naga worship	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Srithep Pradittharam	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Hua Wiang Rangsi	Naga worship	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Aranyikawat		✓		
Nong Khai	Wat Thai	Naga worship, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Pho Chai	Vessantara Festival, Naga worship, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Srikunmuang	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Phra That Klang Nam		✓		
	Wat Sa Kao		✓		
Loei	Wat Si Phum	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Phon Chai	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Maha That	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Srikhunmuang	Vessantara Festival, Isan folklore	✓	✓	✓
	Wat Neramit Wipatsana	Vessantara Festival	✓	✓	✓

Figure 13. Content Analysis of Murals of Buddhist Temples in Northeast Thailand. Source: Collated by the author.

The “Battle of Good and Evil”

As far as individuals are concerned, the murals convey Buddhist teachings. The codes of good and evil within them correspond to the psychological states of the audience, contributing to the overarching 'battle of good and evil.' The tradition of employing images or symbols for Buddha worship and the transmission of Buddhist teachings dates back to ancient India during the construction of pagodas. Consequently, stupas, including decorative carvings, served as a medium for Buddhist art. The use of myths and images as a method for propagating Buddhism aids in the public's understanding of Buddhist teachings (Song, 2002:27-28). Hence, it is not difficult to understand why the main sources of stories shown in murals come from Buddhist scripture or literature, because murals can satisfy Buddhists' belief in producing merit and also spread Buddhism. This is why themes such as Three Worlds, Ten Jataka Tales, and Phra Malai's Journeys to Hell could become mainstream in Thailand, because these storylines, highlighting good and evil, embody the core values of Buddhism – three worlds and merit (see Figure 14 – to inspire good deeds among the public.



Figure 14. Mural depicting three worlds and merit-making, Wat Nua, Roi Et Province. Photo by the author.

The concept of the three worlds has existed since the Sukhothai period. The Siam king at the time laid the foundation for Theravada Buddhism; in addition to allowing monks to preach, he also established monasteries to preserve the fragmented Pali scripture, which later became the source of editing the three worlds (Reynolds, 1976:206). In AD 1345, Prince Lithai of the Sukhothai Kingdom, who later became Phra Maha Thammaracha I (พระมหาธรรมราชาที่๑), reorganized Pali scripture and compiled it into Three Worlds, which has been handed down to this day. The so-called “three worlds” refers to the formless realm, the formed realm, and the realm of desire, which can be further divided into 31 realms. The realms that sentient beings will go to are all determined by the karma and merits of their previous lives. In other words, three worlds and merit are a set of mutual concepts, and also comprise the core meaning of Buddhist temple murals.

The three worlds and merit of Theravada Buddhism form the concept of causality, which is used by Thais to create a meaningful world and to define how the world works. In particular, the ideas of the three worlds and producing merit have had a profound impact on Thai

society. Thus, most Buddhist temples make murals to promote the principle of causality. For believers, the good and evil codes conveyed in murals always remind people “to stay away from all evil and to cultivate good.” Therefore, as far as individuals are concerned, the creation rules surrounding murals belong to the “battle of good and evil.”

The “Battle of Consciousness”

In terms of society, murals reflect ethnic groups’ cultures because ideology can be shaped and ethnic identity can be strengthened through murals in a concept called the “battle of consciousness.” According to Figure 2, up to 71% (17 out of 24) of Buddhist temples incorporate elements of Isan’s culture. They showcase local festivals, traditional customs, attire, and Naga legends to establish their distinctive characteristics. Many of these local cultures have connections to Laotian culture along the border between Thailand and Laos. The Laotians of Thailand and Laos are bound together by the Mekong River. In the past, there was no boundary between the two banks of the Mekong River. However, today’s Mekong River has become the national border between the Laotians of Thailand and Laos. This transformation is attributed to the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1983, which altered the ethnic consciousness of Laotians on both sides of the river.

After the implementation of the Franco-Siamese Treaty, the Thai government labeled the Laotians on the right bank of the river as “Isan people” through education to distinguish them from Laotians in Laos (Mikusol, 2002:93-105). In contrast, Laos vigorously advocated for a sense of “Lao-ness” and carried out language reforms. The present-day Lao language is shaped by French, Vietnamese, and Marxism-Leninism influences, diverging from the Isan dialect, which is influenced by Thai (Fry, 2002:34).

Due to the influence of national identity, the ethnic identity of Laotians, who used to be one family on both sides of the Mekong River, has changed. Although the Mekong River functioned as a geographic border in its early history, the reformation of language, education, and politics in Thailand and Laos has now established it as a delineation influencing the language and identity of Laotians on either side of the Mekong River. This shift not only created distinctions between Laotians in Thailand and Laos but also instigated a struggle for consciousness concerning cultural identity. Despite the cultural similarities between Laotians on both sides of the Mekong River, there has consistently been a political “battle of consciousness” aimed at fostering distinct perceptions between Laotians in Thailand and Laos.

The Vessantara Festival and Naga worship embody longstanding traditions among Laotians. Rooted in Theravada Buddhism and inspired by the Vessantara Jataka, the festival finds artistic expression in scroll paintings and murals during celebrations at Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand and Northern Laos. Moreover, mural themes often reflect the surrounding geography. Shared across Thai and Laotian cultures is the belief in the Naga, a majestic serpent with a crest, residing in the Mekong River as a guardian of the Buddha and the local communities. Hence, the Buddhist temples located in the Mekong River region have a particularly high proportion of Naga murals. For example, Wat Okat, Wat Thai, and Wat Pho Chai express Naga worship through exquisite murals, showing a scene of Naga accompanying the Buddha on the Mekong River (see Figure 15). Laotians worship the Naga and paint images of it in murals. An illustrative example is the Bhuridat-

ta Jataka, narrating the Buddha's rebirth as a Naga prince (Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2003: 1–27). For this reason, the Naga theme is frequently portrayed in murals adorning Buddhist temples along the banks of the Mekong River.



Figure 15. Naga protects Buddha in the Mekong River, Wat Okat, Nakhon Phanom Province. Photo by the author.

As a result, festivals and myths related to the Naga, such as stories and the Fireball Festival, are recorded in murals (see Figure 16). For example, the sim of Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, located in the remote village of Khon Kaen, one can observe both the Vessantara Jataka and Sinsai stories decorating the inner and outer walls.² As an epic originating in Laos, Sinsai holds significant literary importance in its place of origin, and its cultural influence has expanded into Northeast Thailand. Furthermore, there are images of the Naga at the entrance and windows of sim, indicating Naga worship by locals, who view the Naga as a powerful guardian (see Figure 17).



Figure 16. Naga Fireball Festival, Wat Pho Chai, Nong Khai Province. Photo by the author.



Figure 17. Naga protects the entrance of the temple, Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, Khon Kaen Province. Photo by the author.

These murals, which embody Isan's traditional culture, festivals, and folktales, not only highlight the region's local wisdom but also share common themes with the Lao communities across the border. Consequently, questions of cultural recognition have become central to the political management of Lao populations along the Thai–Lao frontier. To differentiate the closely related Thai and Lao cultural identities, the integration of Thai nationalism into northeastern culture emerged as a key strategy. In addition to implementing reforms in language and education, the central government promoted the ideals of the Thammayut order (ธรรมยุติกนิกาย, Dhammayuttika Nikaya, Thammayut) throughout the Northeast. This policy directly influenced the development of Buddhist art in the region, including temple architecture and mural painting.

The Thammayut originated in 1833 as a monastic reform movement initiated by Prince Mongkut (later King Rama IV). It emphasized strict Vinaya observance, a return to scriptural study (*pariyatti*), and a rationalist approach to Buddhist doctrine that sought to purify popular, syncretic practices. Supported and institutionalized by the Chakri monarchy, Thammayut became an instrument of monastic modernization and state religious policy in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Siam (Dhammasakiyo, 2006:34–36, Bangperng, 2020:1163, 1169).

Immediately after the reign of King Rama IV, the Thammayut order began expanding into northeastern Thailand in 1851, with its first presence in the Ubon area. This expansion unfolded through several channels, including royal patronage, the dispatch of centrally trained monks to rural areas, and the establishment of Thammayut institutions by local elites who had been ordained or educated in Bangkok (Bangperng, 2020:1163–1165). For example, Supatnaram Temple (วัดสุปถนาราม, 1853) in Ubon Ratchathani Province was regarded as the first Thammayut monastery founded in the region, which served as a key institution for disseminating central religious policies and education. (Buddhist Monastery Department, 1995:371; Phra Phrom Muni, 1936, cited from Bangperng, 2020:1162)

These institutional mechanisms generated both administrative and aesthetic impacts. Monasteries affiliated with the Thammayut order tended to emphasize canonical narra-

tives, adopt standardized iconographic models, and promote textual literacy in religious instruction. These emphases shaped mural commission practices, influencing stylistic approaches, thematic choices, and narrative structures so that they aligned with Siamese artistic conventions and diverged from Lao mural traditions.

This distinction can be observed in both old and new monasteries across Isan. For example, the old murals at Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram in Khon Kaen Province preserve the Sinsai stories, which belong to the Lao folk narrative tradition. After the signing of the Franco-Siamese Treaty in 1893, however, the Laotians in the Isan region became Thai citizens under Siamese rule. Consequently, temple halls were constructed according to plans prescribed by Bangkok's authorities, and murals began to follow the aesthetic framework of Thai traditional art, discouraging the depiction of themes rooted in Lao culture – such as Sinsai – in Northeastern Thailand. In addition, in some temples, mural placement also shifted from the ordination hall (known in Isan as *sim*) to the monastery's sermon hall (Yanpisit, 2023:4). These transformations reflected deliberate efforts to differentiate Isan's artistic practice from that of the Laos and illustrated how the Siamese administrative structure shaped the visual and cultural expression of Isan murals.

Criteria such as the artist's identity, textual elements, and linear design have become instrumental in distinguishing works originating from Thailand and Laos (see Figure 18). Differentiating murals by artist and painting style makes Isan's murals distinct from Lao-tian ones, representing an invisible contest of cultural consciousness. The introduction of Siamese artistic conventions by the Thammayut order – including Thai stylistic features and Thai painting pattern – further contributed to the distinctiveness of Buddhist murals in northeastern Thailand compared with those in northern Laos.

The Bhuddhaisawan Chapel (พระที่นั่งพุทธไธสวรรย์), located within the National Museum in Bangkok, is renowned for its murals executed in the Early Rattanakosin style. Thutongkinanon conducted a systematic analysis of the chapel's colors and techniques, revealing that its distinguishing features include the use of the Thai Line and vibrant tonal contrasts to differentiate figures and visual planes, thereby creating a sense of depth and a mysterious ambience that evokes faith. In addition, Siamese artisans were also adept at applying gold pigment to specific details – particularly the Buddha's body – to distinguish it from other figures and motifs within the composition (Thutongkinanon, 2011:125-127). The chromatic and technical characteristics associated with the Siamese style remain evident in many contemporary Isan temples. The murals of Wat Pho Chai วัดโพธิ์ชัย in Nong Khai Province, for instance, clearly reflect the influence of Siamese artistic conventions.

Thutongkinanon argues that the colors and techniques of the murals in the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel not only exemplify Siamese artistic conventions but also embody Thai wisdom (ภูมิปัญญาไทย, *phumipanya thai*) (Thutongkinanon, 2011:127). This notion of “Thai wisdom” metaphorically represents the ideology of Thai nationalism, distinguishing it from Western and neighboring cultural frameworks. In this sense, the murals of the Bhuddhaisawan Chapel encapsulate a multifaceted process – from the creation by Siamese painters to the audience's viewing experience – that conveys Buddhist teachings while simultaneously constructing a Siam-centered cultural identity through the organization of visual elements such as line, color, form, and composition.

When Siamese artistic conventions were introduced to the Isan region through the Tham-mayut order, muralists who worked under the influence of nationalist ideology similarly replicated Siamese color schemes, compositions, and techniques to reconstruct the viewer's religious experience, contributing to the formation of Isan's distinct cultural character and aligning it more closely with the cultural identity of Siam.

The promotion of Isan culture's distinctive features as a means of differentiating it from Lao culture has long been a key objective of state policy in northeastern Thailand. As early as 2011, under the sponsorship of the European Union, the region implemented the Isan Culture Maintenance and Revitalization Programme (2011–2016) across four municipalities in Khon Kaen Province.³ The program involved teaching Isan as a mother tongue, developing a multimedia cultural archive, and designing and installing multilingual signage to create a new linguistic landscape that would legitimize and revitalize the Thai-Lao/Isan language and culture (Draper, 2017: 59–71). The initiative was premised on the promotion of the “Thai-Lao” language – a term used specifically to describe the Isan people, distinct from the “Lao” or “Laotian” identity of neighboring Laos. This distinction underscored the cultural and linguistic differentiation between the Thai and Lao spheres of identity.

After the Mekong River became the official border between Thailand and Laos, differentiation was required not only in language but also in the visual expression of Buddhist temple murals on both sides of the river. From a social perspective, murals embody ethnic culture. They affirm the locality and legitimacy of Isan's cultural identity while simultaneously reinforcing the distinctiveness of Laotians in Isan from those in Laos. In this sense, the guidelines governing mural production in Isan articulate cultural identity and form an integral part of this ongoing “battle of consciousness.”

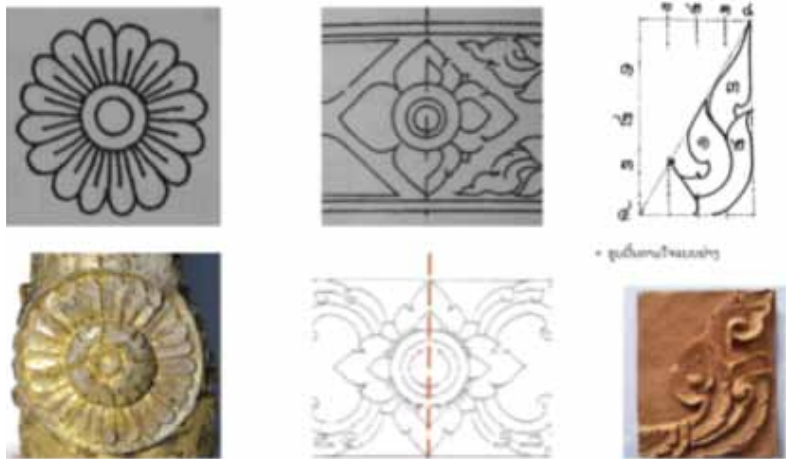


Figure 18. Thai painting pattern (upper) and Lao painting pattern (lower), collated by the author.

The “Battle of Intangible Cultural Heritage”

Lastly, from a national perspective, local murals that embody the value of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) are often interpreted by the state apparatus as part of the broader “battle of ICH.” This recognition and interpretation by governmental institutions further shape the overarching understanding and contestation within the realm of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The previously mentioned struggle for consciousness among Laotians on both

sides of the Mekong River, at the national level, also manifests as a contest over Intangible Cultural Heritage between Thailand and Laos.

Many scholars have studied Isan's murals since the 1980s and identified the following characteristics, organized by the author (cf. Brereton, 2010:187-191; Brereton and Yenchey, 2010:25-40, 45-48, 53, 69-72; Noivangklang, 2006:290-297):

- First, use local themes and emphasize the narrative features of the images.
- Second, the content presents a frank and simple amateur style.
- Third, there are rough lines and unique color skills.
- Fourth, the characteristic images are diverse.

However, the challenge arises because these four features are also observable in the Buddhist temples of Northern Laos, where Laotians constitute the dominant ethnic group. This similarity arises from the shared themes, styles, and functions of murals in both Isan and Northern Laos. Consequently, distinguishing Laotian art in Thailand and Laos primarily depends on the factor of the artist.

In essence, artists from Thailand and Laos have shaped the dominant artistic styles in their respective countries. Differences in ideology and creative approach have resulted in murals adorning Buddhist temples in both nations with distinct aesthetic characteristics. Furthermore, the training of artists in Thailand and Laos is closely tied to each country's cultural policies. Examining these policies is therefore essential to understanding the disparities in cultural capital – encompassing art institutions, artistic talent, and knowledge – between the two nations.

Regarding cultural competition, Thailand and Laos each have their own strengths and weaknesses. Although Thailand had an early start, it has undergone rapid Westernization, whereas Laos has retained much of its traditional culture. Thailand's tourism industry began developing in the 1960s, accompanied by the active establishment of art institutions to cultivate local talent. In 2016, Thailand passed the Promotion and Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 (พระราชบัญญัติส่งเสริมและรักษามรดกภูมิปัญญาทางวัฒนธรรม พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๙), thereby enhancing its cultural heritage protection system (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2016). In comparison, Laos lagged behind in terms of art institutions and cultural policies. In fact, Laos was once ahead of Thailand in protecting cultural heritage following its reform and opening up in 1986. However, Thailand ultimately surpassed Laos in cultural heritage protection, in part due to the latter's weaker institutional follow-up.

After the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism in the 1980s, Laos gradually developed its art and literature under the influence of UNESCO and the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage. In addition to establishing the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism to revitalize culture, Laos implemented a series of cultural protection programs from the 1990s onward, including the Preservation of Palm-leaf Manuscripts Program (1992), the Preservation of Lao Weaving Program (1996), the Preservation of National Important Historic Sites Program (1990), the Revitalization of Ancient Lao Literature Project (1998), and the Preservation of Religious Culture Program (1979). In 2009, Laos signed the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH Conven-

tion), seven years earlier than Thailand. Moreover, the Lao government enacted the Law on National Heritage of Lao PDR in 2005, which was amended in 2013 and promulgated in 2014. The revised Article 11 defines the scope of intangible cultural heritage, including local cultural creations, social practices, folk literature, beliefs, traditional songs and dances, languages, and traditional medicine, thereby affirming their cultural value and encouraging the Lao people to preserve local wisdom (Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Lao PDR 2014).

These initiatives led Thai scholars at the time to conclude that Laos had established and effectively operated a management system for local, national, and world-class cultural heritage that surpassed Thailand's (Sornwichai and Unaprom 2012: 2). However, within just a few years, Thailand caught up by developing the Draft Law on Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, publishing the Draft Amendment to the Law on Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2015, passing the Promotion and Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 in 2016, and signing the ICH Convention in the same year. To date, Thailand has announced nine batches of national ICH lists encompassing 395 items (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2025), thereby taking the lead in terms of soft power. Despite having enacted cultural laws and preservation programs, Laos still lags far behind Thailand in terms of artistic capital, as Thailand had developed tourism, art, and culture more than thirty years earlier than Laos.

As a matter of fact, Laos once had the opportunity to catch up with Thailand; however, the Annual Plan (1976-1977), the Three-Year Plan (1978-1980), and a series of Five-Year Plans (1981-2016) implemented by the Laotian government primarily focused on economic growth. This emphasis marginalized art and culture, preventing the systematic cultivation of artistic and cultural talent and leaving Laos's artistic capital increasingly behind that of Thailand (cf. Aneksuk 2006:1; Nishimura et al. 2016).

The divergent trajectories of cultural policies in Thailand and Laos have, on the one hand, cultivated artists with differing ideologies and subjectively distinguished between the otherwise very similar Thai and Laotian aesthetics; on the other hand, they have created a gap in the soft power of the two countries. Thailand's cultural industry and artistic talent far surpass those of Laos, which poses a significant challenge to Laos, given that the main ethnic group in both Isan and Laos is the Laotian, sharing many cultural traits. Cultural capital, in this context, directly influences cultural representation. Consequently, once Laotian culture is transformed into a cultural heritage or tourist attraction in Northeast Thailand, its original cultural identity is relatively eclipsed.

Brereton (2012:58, 61, 63; 2015b:8-9) illustrates this with the urban development of Khon Kaen Province in Northeast Thailand, showing how the city strategically fostered urban tourism by incorporating the Laotian epic Sinsai into Buddhist temple murals, religious ceremonies, and urban design elements, as exemplified in Wat Chaisi (วัดไชยศรี) and Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram (Figures 19, 20). The Khon Kaen government skillfully navigated issues of national identity, transforming the Laotian epic into a local literary treasure. This case underscores the importance of cultural capital. For both Thailand and Laos, urban aesthetics and the preservation of murals in Buddhist temples are closely linked to the cultural industry and artistic talent. Ultimately, mastery of cultural capital determines who can prevail in the international competition for soft power.



Figure 19. Part of Sinsai, Wat Sanuan Wari Phatthanaram, Khon Kaen Province, the photo by the author.



Figure 20. Sinsai street light, Khon Kaen City, Khon Kaen Province, the photo by the author.

Concerning murals, they fall under the category of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Thailand's policies for mural protection are more comprehensive than those of Laos. Since 2007, Article 66 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๐) stipulates that communities have the right to preserve, restore, and manage outstanding local art and culture to ensure cultural sustainability (Office of the Council of State, 2007: 18–19). Subsequently, the Ministry of Culture implemented the Promotion and Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act, B.E. 2559 in 2016, which classifies murals under the category of folk literature and languages as part of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2016). Meanwhile, the Department of Fine Arts has been developing the draft Act on Ancient Monuments, Antiques, Objects of Art, and National Museums, another key legislative framework aimed at safeguarding mural heritage. In contrast, Laos lags far behind in legislation, education, and cultural capital. Even though murals in Laos retain traditional advantages, the lack of ICH protection poli-

cies and trained personnel limits their preservation and promotion. For murals in Thailand and Laos alike, the underlying cultural capital and policies are the core factors determining the “battle” over ICH.

In conclusion, the murals in Buddhist temples of Isan encompass religious, cultural, and historical elements, with creation rules closely intertwined with Isan society (see Figure 21). At the individual level, Isan murals emphasize the causality of good and evil behavior, convey the importance of producing merit, and reflect the cultural principles of Buddhism, corresponding to what can be termed a “spiritual battle.” At the societal level, these murals subtly reveal the characteristics of Northeast Thailand, highlighting the locality of Laotians and reflecting Isan artists’ creative norms and ethnic identity, which can be understood as a “battle of consciousness.” At the national level, although the content of murals on both sides of the Mekong River is similar, the structures governing their production and protection underscore differences in cultural capital and policy between the two countries. The set of legal frameworks exercised by the state apparatus is embedded within the murals, constituting what may be described as the international “battle of ICH.”

Item	The rules for creating murals	The “spirit of battle”
Individual	Cultural rules of Buddhism	Battle of good and evil
Society	The rules of cultural identity of Isan artists	Battle of consciousness
Country	Legal rules of the state apparatus	Battle of ICH

Figure 21. Analysis of the “spirit of battle” in murals in Northeast Thailand. Source: Collated by the author.

Conclusion

This study examined the texts of murals from 24 Buddhist temples in Northeast Thailand to elucidate the rules governing the creation of Isan murals and, in turn, to deconstruct aspects of Isan culture. The research findings indicate that the guiding principle underlying the production of Isan murals is the “spirit of battle,” which is embedded within the murals and operates across individual, societal, and national levels, respectively reflecting the “battle of good and evil,” the “battle of consciousness,” and the “battle of ICH.”

The creation principles of Isan murals are closely intertwined with local religious, ethnic, and political elements, giving rise to distinctive regional characteristics. The phenomenon of the “localization of art” has been a recurring theme throughout Thailand’s history. For instance, Buddhist statues from different periods exhibit unique artistic styles while simultaneously reflecting multicultural fusion. In essence, the dual aspects of “local characteristics” and “cultural integration” continually shape Thai culture. Bovornkitti (2005: 356) asserted that this dynamic drives Buddhist groups in various regions to pursue distinctiveness.

The same applies to Buddhist murals. Muralists across regions on both sides of the Mekong River adapt the content of their works to the local context, thereby imbuing them with regional characteristics. It is not difficult to identify the local characteristics of Isan’s murals; nevertheless, comparatively little attention has been paid to the cultural context underlying these works. This context – spanning the individual, society, and nation – is interconnected, forming a hierarchical set of rules for creation that reflects Buddhist teachings, ethnic identity, and the soft power of states through murals.

Beyond highlighting the locality of Isan's murals, this study adopts a perspective that "gazes at" the murals to examine the multifaceted relationships between Buddhist temple murals and Isan society from the inside out, revealing the "spirit of battle" embedded within. The term "spirit of battle" here does not correspond to Buddhist doctrine but rather denotes a cultural characteristic rooted in the regional context. Cultural dynamics in Northeast Thailand foster a competitive interpretation of Isan murals, as the governments of both Thailand and Laos aim to promote national identity and spirit through these works, extending their significance beyond the religious domain. Consequently, murals in Northeast Thailand acquire political implications that surpass their devotional purpose. For Isan mural artists, the creative environment shaped by the Thailand-Laos border effectively accentuates the distinctiveness of Isan murals.

Endnotes

- 1 The three worlds (ไตรภูมิ) – the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm – form the core of the Buddhist cosmos. The desire realm involves sensual desires, the form realm has form without desire, and the formless realm is purely mental. The three worlds contain countless small worlds, each centered on Mount Sumeru. A thousand small worlds form a small thousand-world, a thousand small thousand-worlds form a medium thousand-world, and a thousand medium thousand-worlds form a great thousand-world, collectively called the Three Thousand Great Thousand Worlds.
- 2 Brief Summary of the Sinsai Story. See Brereton, 2012: 63–65.
- 3 The four municipalities include Ban Phai (BPM), Chum Phae (CPM), Khon Kaen (KKM), and Muang Phon (MPM) in Khon Kaen Province.

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Nature Contained– A Practice-led Art Project:

*Within the Principles of Ikebana and on the
Nature of Harmony*

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Abstract

This research redefines unity between art, design and urban architecture, and wellbeing as an active reconciliation and conscious construction. The findings resonate with contemporary creative practices prioritizing audience engagement. A practice-led and process driven design/art project, it explores the notion of harmony through the Japanese Zen of Ikebana (flower arrangement) and Chasitsu (Tea room). Situated in Bangkok, the process incorporates cross-cultural interactions between Thai business life and Japanese meditative traditions. The methodology re-traces Ikebana flowers into static lines of a steel sculpture. Placed within a furniture design showroom's internal courtyard, the installation is activated dialogically through a survey that probes the harmony between buildings and people. The findings reveal that the living sculpture of a tree or a large-scale flower arrangement enhances better wellbeing in the urban dweller. A dialectal interplay between the rapid pace of life operating commercial spaces contrasts with a fundamental human longing for something timeless and natural beyond business and the ephemeral.

Keywords: Practice-led, Art, Ikebana, Harmony, Balance, Dynamic

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Introduction

My creative journey began through a love of flowers. As a teenager, I often visited an orchid farm, where I felt enveloped by an illuminated stillness. A multitude of flowers, poised as small living sculptures and positioned within the grey steel structure of the greenhouse, pushed and pulled petals into the air. Undulating planes of orchid flowers teetered at the end of fragile stems. Wandering through rows of orchids I escaped the frenetic nature of a world city, into a partially man-made quietude. Flowers became a central part of my life, and I became a floral designer of repute, balancing flower colors, shapes, forms, sizes, with foliage and industrial materials. At the core of each arrangement is a search for harmony.



Figure 1. Author's Floral Design, INTERFLORAL.

Being a painter, I transposed the language of flowers into existential metaphors. Living through the stages of my life - the sometimes budding, sometimes wilting camellias and roses, half delineated and sometimes receding into shadows, and then re-emerging to fill my monumental canvases. My practice-based PhD research focused on floriography - the language of flowers - tracing their historical meaning and expression throughout painting, design and symbolism. Flowers and the waning phases of nature embody metaphors for life's trajectory - in my case - a mother, a painter and a researcher. I found that nature always seeks equilibrium in order to sustain harmony. Nature Contained is a part of my creative practice to expand the principles of harmony underpinned by the Japanese Zen philosophy that instructs Ikebana.

While the urban landscape becomes increasingly challenging to navigate emotionally, design and art approaches can transcend functional aesthetics beyond the commercial environment to foster harmony and contemplation. A dialectal interplay between the rapid pace of life operating in bustling lobbies and commercial spaces contrasts with a fundamental human need towards stillness and tranquility, for something timeless beyond commerce and the ephemeral. Art can construct an environment beyond a sole focus on commerce to also include healing stillness. Bangkok, the ever-expanding metropolis I call home, a city both orderly and sprawling, becomes the specified site for my artwork. Familiar with both Thailand and Japan, I sought to place into an urban landscape shaped by the hard surfaces of concrete, steel and glass, a city constantly punctuated by the sounds of

automobiles, a moment of meditation, a focal point for harmony in the form of an abstracted, man-made 'Ikebana-ish' steel sculpture.

Although Thailand and Japan are culturally different, the level and depth of cultural interplay through my practice of Ikebana was transcribed into my inspiration and creative process. The sculpture grew out of a flower arrangement, a living sculpture. Ikebana literally means "making flowers alive" or "living flowers." Widely known as a form of traditional Japanese flower arrangement, Ikebana holds certain aesthetic rules and is an art form which lies embedded in Japanese life and culture, seeking the union of nature and humanity in private and public spaces. Its essence encapsulates harmony constructed by balancing a push and pull of flowers, grass, and wood, of levels reaching left and right, descending and ascending in a deceptively disorderly process into a still arrangement that is alive. Deicher suggests that such a dynamic unity is produced by a multiplicity of stiff planes and the undulating lines of flowers. (2021).



Figure 2. Large Scale experimental Ikebana arrangements titled "CONNECT" Akane Teshigahara Solo Exhibition for 20th Anniversary (2021/Sogetsu West, Kyoto).

Drawing on Ikebana's (the arrangement) and Chasitsu's (the room) underlying principles of existential balance I considered how harmony could be embodied. I set out to construct a sculpture incorporating a dynamic equilibrium governed by natural laws - those of balancing opposites. Sciam writes that establishing equilibrium between the manifold appearance of the world and the synthesis invoked by the consciousness does not mean attaining fixed points and immutable truth. Same as a trunk of the tree and then a rectangle or a square is now a metaphor of the unifying consciousness of mankind dealing with the boundless and multifarious space of the world (Sciam 2019).

To understand the nature of harmony, the research revolves around how harmony is often misperceived as static, when it is more a dynamic process of reconciliation, balancing function with aesthetics. The methodology re-traces the organic lines of Ikebana into abstracted lines of steel in a sculpture, then activates the installation dialogically by discuss-

ing harmony with employees and clients of a furniture design show room. A survey also asks the audience if a sculpture or planting a tree in the courtyard would be a better way to communicate harmony between nature, heaven and people. Out of the answers grew discussion around harmony and whether a sculpture or a tree would be a better way to communicate harmony between nature, heaven and people. With Bangkok as the specified site for artwork, the sculpture highlights another implication on cross cultural interaction in a creative process since cohesive urban planning functions in various degrees depending on how wealth is scattered throughout the city.



Figure 3. Traditional Japanese Tearoom with blossom ikebana, Interior Design deliberations.

One of design objectives was to establish a tangible balance that could contribute to emotional and physical well-being in individuals. Interior design is not an isolated phenomenon, but it too, functions or not through its surrounding relationships with materials and people. It is a search for concord amidst tensions. For me, working with Ikebana is a way to construct harmony, to communicate the dynamics of balance by design. To experiment, I primarily draw on the principles of Ikebana, translating its core design of three lines of balancing *Shin* (heaven), *Soe* (earth) and *Hikake* (human) extending vertically and horizontally into the sculpture.



Figure 4. Sculpture in courtyard placed in center as a focal point.



Figure 5. Existing trees in courtyard – relegated to the sides of the courtyard.

Michael Sciam asserts that “we are constantly stimulated by the unforeseeable flow of existence in everyday life and open up to innovation on the one hand while seeking to maintain the integrity of our established equilibriums on the other.” (Sciam 2019) Acknowledging and translating such diversity might result in a dynamic unity if the elements of design are synchronized. Plants and flower arrangements traditionally act as conduits of harmony in commercial spaces meditating unity between nature and human presence.

The text starts by briefly providing a short history of Ikebana to clarify its main principles, the research probes the search for harmony, then moves on to consider the materials and methods used, with results collected through a questionnaire to gauge the public's response. In the discussion, an answer is found as to whether sculptures, trees or flowers contribute more to harmony than sculptures in a commercial space or if the underlying composition of Ikebana following three main lines of shin (representing heaven), soe (representing earth) and hikae (representing man) remain present. The search for harmony is a balancing act central to humans, art, and nature, between earth, and sky. Ikebana too seeks a balance between heaven, earth, and man.

Situated in Bangkok, with a culturally distinct urban context to Ikebana's Japanese origins, this research ultimately interrogates how harmony manifests across cultural boundaries and spatial conditions. It asks whether living trees or sculptures better communicate harmony in commercial spaces, and how the principles of Ikebana might inform contemporary design practices that reconcile Eastern and Western approaches to balance and form.

The project *Nature Contained* extends my creative practice through a combined exploration of flower arrangement as sculpture and a greater conceptual reflection on Ikebana's embodied harmony. To perceive harmony as a state of stillness would be a deception. Harmony evolves, not as a static state but as a dynamic interaction with external forces. Harmony is also imposed as something that is consciously constructed. It is a process of reconciliation. Arranging flowers or welding a steel sculpture both entail structuring compositions in space, working with basic vertical-horizontal lines and color elements. The final form represents a balance of essential opposing forces, be they yin and yang, dynamic and static, or positive and negative.

Ikebana

Historically, the rapid spread of Chinese culture and Buddhism in the region brought the Chinese practice of floral offerings into Japan. Japanese Abbot Senmu, credited with establishing the foundation of Ikebana, learned from flower arrangement traditions in China. In those days, only religious ceremonies or offerings involved flower arrangement, with an example shown in Figure 6 below. However, they eventually became fixtures in courtrooms, temples, and homes (Richie et al. 1966).



Figure 6. Ikebana as One Type of Religious Offering, *The Masters' Book of Ikebana: Background & Principles of Japanese Flower Arrangement*.



Figure 7. Arrangement of Ikebana for Religious Offerings, *The Masters' Book of Ikebana: Background & Principles of Japanese Flower Arrangement*.

Ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of arranging flowers, captures the beauty of nature as a sparse living sculpture. As early as 1400 AD, Ikebana had developed to reflect the Japanese relationship towards nature through its native spiritual belief in animism, Shinto. According to Shinto, everything is alive and equal to a human whether it be a river, stone or flower. In Ikebana, a composition begins with giving lines, heights and planes philosophical and human meanings. Under its basic rules three central branches signify "heaven," "man," and "earth." *The Principle of Three* represents the wholeness in flower arrangement where man ("so") stands in the middle position between heaven ("shin") and earth ("gyo"). True

Ikebana is part of our life, not constrained by time or style of living but a form of design driven by meaning and meditation. Based on Shintoism and Buddhism, Ikebana embodies a harmony reached by transformation and never by opposition – it is more like an embrace, an inclusion of philosophical rules conjoined in a process with a practitioner's individuality and experimentation. The arranger's personality – and a sense of order – remain within the confines of Ikebana, the use of primary colors, and the arrangement of the different blocks, which correspond to the overall floral arrangement, alignment of the stems and leaves, and vessel.

Since WWII, Ikebana practitioners have invited experimentation and its masters have called for innovation. Moribana style, developed by Ohara Unshin around 1890, challenges the learner to express abstract ideas as well as realistic forms. Sofu wrote in a 1959 text-book that "Ikebana will become obsolete when arrangements merely fit a pattern. True flower arrangements should be lively and active. Please think about the characteristics of each flower and tree and the beauty of the changing seasons. Please understand the inventive ideas of flower arrangers and the beauty of containers and surroundings." (Stalker, 2017:23). These are not timid and tiny arrangements, but sculptural works that at times explode into its space. Herrigel wrote that "practicing with the heart, harmonious wholeness of body, soul and surroundings are the important things" lies at the core of Ikebana (1958). Harmony evolves, not as a static state but as a dynamic interaction with external forces.



Figure 8. Floral Design, INTERFLORAL, Author.

When juxtaposing abstract sculpture against an arrangement, Ikebana's fundamental theme of the harmonious union between nature and humanity becomes clear. The arranger's personality – and a sense of order – remain within the confines of Ikebana, the use of primary elements, and the arrangement of the material against the surrounding space as the different 'blocks,' correspond to the overall floral arrangement, its alignment of the stems and leaves, and vessel. Again, by using the horizontal and vertical elements, the actual Ikebana elements are reduced to an abstract minimalistic form, with the goal of depicting universal harmony underlying the tangible objects themselves. In such an integration of contrasts, the borderless blocks in the below diagram reflect that such an abstraction could serve as a universal pictorial language – one that communicates the dynamic, evolutionary forces balancing nature and the human experience. Essentially, the abstraction depicts the purest form. To this point I wondered if harmony is a reduction of something to its purest form, removing noise of unnecessary decorative elements, into stillness.

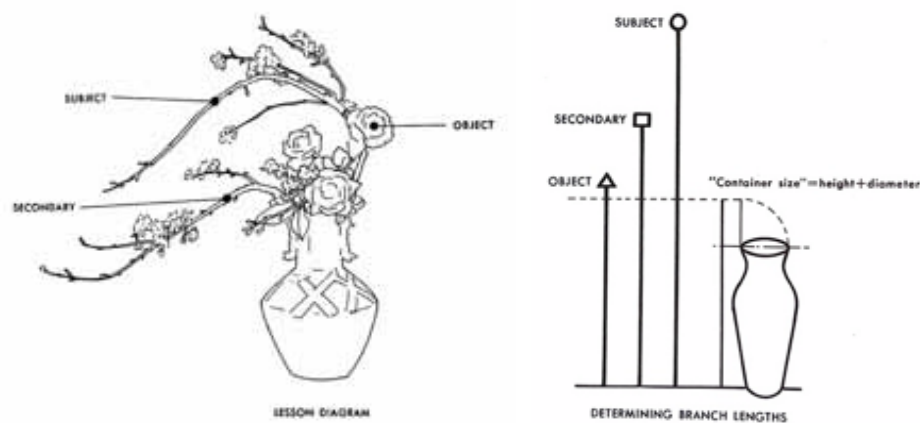


Figure 9. Ikebana principles, *The Masters' Book of Ikebana: Background & Principles of Japanese Flower Arrangement*.

The design of the sculpture *Harmonized Structure* sits within the context of the history of Ikebana because Ikebana always belongs to its place, to a room. The Japanese tearoom, in which Ikebana plays a central role, is also called *Chasitsu* and is designed according to four principles:

- **wa** (harmony) - a desire for reciprocity, both at the tea gathering and in the outside world
- **kei** (respect) - awareness of one's individual role and responsibilities and appropriate decorum
- **sei** (purity) - a commitment to preserve social and spiritual integrity
- **jaku** (elegance and tranquility) - savoring the transient moment to gain renewal (305) (Cartwright, 2019)

What happens to an urban landscape or a corporate building and its usually stark vestibules if the principles of *Chasitsu's* *wa*, *kei*, *sei* and *jaku* are applied in an interplay between the man-made and the natural? *Chasitsu* transposed into a working environment, and Ikebana shaping the sculpture by lines representing heaven, earth and human in an abstraction, structure in space. The sculpture traced the air around the boundaries of its form by pushing and pulling opposites while still being balanced, by a counterpoint. It should wobble and topple, but it did not.

Once finalized, the sculpture was placed in the courtyard of a furniture show room. A survey was conducted, asking the audience whether the sculpture communicated harmony or whether planting a tree in the courtyard would be a better way to enhance harmony between nature, heaven and people. Drawing on Ikebana's underlying Buddhist principles of existential balance, Ikebana may be a way to mediate a harmony which does not come naturally in a corporate space populated by motion and stress in places often stripped to the barest forms of the neutral. The article 'Ikebana a gran escala,' focusing on works of Tetsunori Kawana, states that, "Japanese people of all walks of life find so much well-being with floral arrangements that they include them in their daily chores. In addition to its obvious aesthetic purpose, and its interest in bringing something natural to the domestic environment, they also use it as a method of meditation, since it makes them more receptive to the passage of time, seasonal changes and the cycles of life." ("Ikebana a gran escala" 2009).

To incorporate Ikebana with western interior design is not a novel idea. Australian architecture studio FMD Architects and Ruum collaborated in the project *Ikebana House*, that

aims to depict the connection between nature and self-expression with natural elements, (Design Boom (2023)). A public room in an urban environment could be designed in similar ways. I sought to bring in an element of these ideas, into an existing place as an intervention. Do tree and living plants and flowers contribute greater to harmony than sculptures? Is it only the composition or the live flowers and its presence or nature that counts? The results were surprising.



Figure 10. Charlotte Gyllenhammar Die for You 1993.

An upside-down oak hung above the space between buildings of Stockholm in Sweden. Artists also work with living forms at a grand scale in urban environments to juxtapose the vulnerability of nature within a concrete landscape, Public Art Agency Sweden (2023).



Figure 11. On Running Shoes Office, Zurich.

Setting out on a creative quest echoing contemporary artist and interior design who combine both object and dialogue, Gyllenhammar's *Die for You*, is a sustainable installation of a healthy hanging tree without soil at On Running Shoes Office, Zurich.

The dialogue became an essential part of the investigation. The questionnaire activated the sculpture which could not just be a focal point for looking but had to be a site for discussion, for dialogue and exchanges to come alive. Without the questionnaire and the dialogue, the sculpture would have been just another object, less accessible to grasp its intent of harmony informed by nature. A tree, we understand and respond to atavistically. The reverence of trees is in the DNA of humans, for the shelter it provides, the warmth by its logs it gives to cook food over an open fire, its branches shelter a place to hide from sun and rain. All opposites of functions, enveloped by beauty, a tree is revered wordlessly as a site of harmony. A steel sculpture does not automatically conjure such reverence or trust to be a conduit of wellbeing and harmony. Dialogue had to activate the sculpture because it was not an end product but a process of investigation.

The Australian contemporary artist Ross Gibson used his conversations with visitors as artwork that took place over three months in the lobby at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Conversation logs were then shared online during the 2008 Biennale of Sydney.



Figure 12. The Thai artist Sakarin Krue-On created Terraced Rice Fields, rice field, ca. 7000 sq., at Schloss Wilhelmshoehe in Kassel, Germany for documental 2 in 2007.

An oversize project at one of the world's most prestigious contemporary art events, the field was bound to fail if the goal was to create a conventional rice crop. Instead, its focus was on the involved intellectual journey and process. The rice field became a collaboration between artist, traditional Thai rice farmers, local scientists, art workers, and residents. Such practices result in a kind of practice-led art project, where the journey constructs the goal and an exchange. Similar approaches are adapted in contemporary art and interior design "examining how civil ideas and sentiments can spin out from shared investigation" (Gibson, 2008). Krue-On's Terraced Rice Fields is "a contemporary artwork with focus on the intellectual journey" (Public Delivery, 2022). These works illustrate a compelling trajectory in contemporary art and design, moving from explorations of the human-object relation-

ship to broader socio-environmental engagements. They collectively demonstrate a shift towards experiential, collaborative, and conceptually driven practices that challenge traditional notions of art and design. My open-ended questions are therefore more about an intellectual quest and shared conversations as opposed to functional design realizations. Eventually, such an investigation may inform a design practice and contribute to a greater sensitivity towards harmony.



Figure 13. Final Sculpture, Author.

Materials and Methodology

This practice-led art project applied a mixed methodology, integrating creative practice, site-specific sculpture installation, and audience engagement, bending branches and lines, materials and methods into an experimentation. The sculpture explored conceptual tensions between balance and form through geometric abstraction and tested the boundaries of harmony as the installation looked as if it was about to fall over. Only the center holds it still, by balancing the opposing weights of left and right. The shapes invite the viewer to contemplate the directions of equilibrium. The sculpture Harmonized Union created for the project Nature Contained follows three main lines of an Ikebana composition that include heaven, earth and human and the philosophy of the Chasitsu tearoom.



Figure 14. Private urban space, Furniture Showroom Courtyard, Bangkok.

The courtyard is bare, with trees relegated along the walls. Its space waiting for a welcoming focal point. A space filled with the potential to become a calming breathing space away for outside urban chaos.

The project started with flower arranging using the principles of Ikebana then these ideas were translated into a metal structure. This experiment explores the “structures” within Ikebana’s various styles and schools. The lines of Ikebana became a structure in space, balancing shin (heaven); soe (earth); and hikae (human). Through the arrangement, and then sculpture, space is activated by things around it. The sculpture, defined by straight lines, reflects a radical simplification searching for the essence of energy and dynamic forces that govern nature and the universe. Pure planes create harmony by contrast balancing these universal and elemental forces. Developing the sketches of the sculpture, the author considered the interplay of opposites in the world to explain the constant interaction and movement towards balance and harmony. The grid-like effect remains, turning the existing object - the Ikebana arrangement - into an abstraction of harmony's principles, not an illusion but a tangible form of illusion in the visible world.

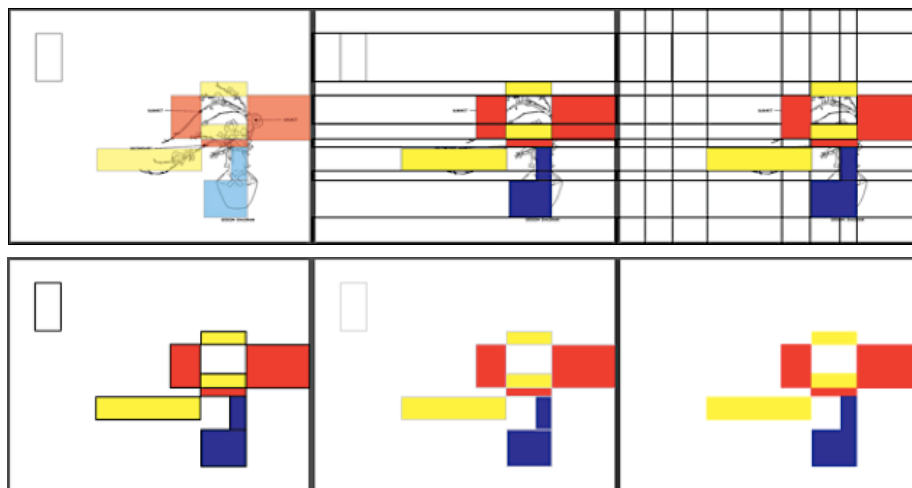


Figure 15. Experimental Composition of Nageire Style with Structure in Space, Author.



Figure 16. Experiment of flowers and metal, Author.

This experiment develops into a 3D metal sculpture in metal with silver, white, and black colors. The space will act as the balancing agent replacing the white block seen in the diagram above. Based on my earlier Ikebana arrangement, integrating steel and hard lines with the decayed soft mass of grass and flowers, I moved into a complete steel version of Ikebana, the sculpture.

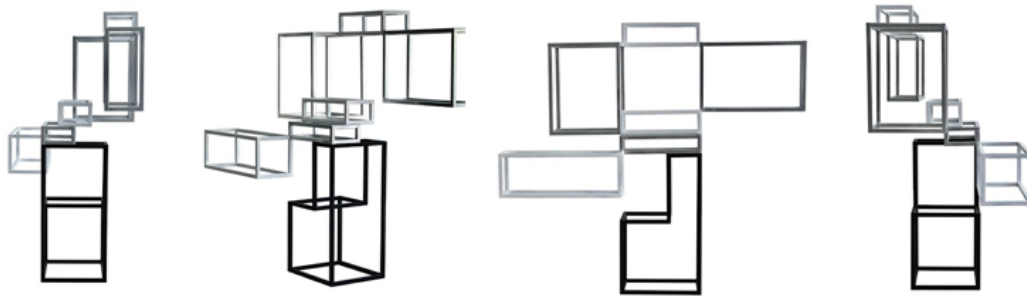


Figure 17. Metal Sculpture, Author.

When juxtaposing abstract lines of metal in a sculpture against a flower arrangement, Ikebana's fundamental theme of the harmonious union between nature and humanity becomes clearer. Without harmony, we lose our balance. The sculpture looks as if it is about to fall over, yet it stays still and stable. Harmony may be understood as fixed, but it is dynamic, a push and pull of contradictory forces. Somewhere in the middle of the unrest, harmony evolves as a quiet place to rest.

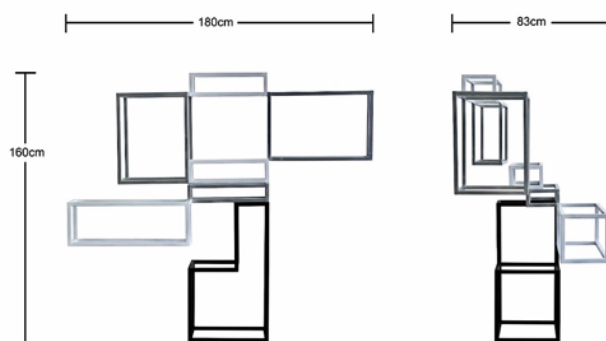


Figure 18. Sculpture with dimensions, Author.

Selected diagram for sculpture experiment: Experimental Composition of Nageire Style (as shown in Figure 15).

Process: 3D CAD Designs



Figure 19. 3D CAD Designs, Author.

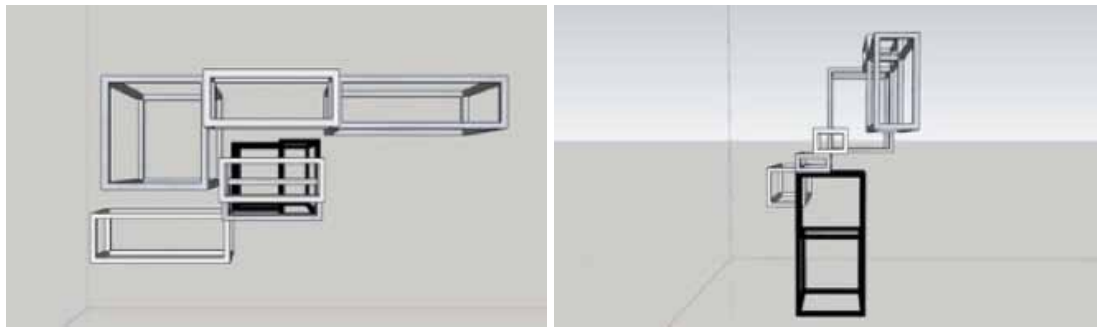


Figure 19 cont.. 3D CAD Designs, Author.

Process: Construction



Figure 20. Construction process, Author.

Installation of Harmonized Structure in Showroom Courtyard



Figure 21. Installation of the sculpture. The sculpture stood in the courtyard of the showroom, aligned with the corresponding lines of architectural black metal steel door frames.

Once installed, I asked the employees, who would be passing the sculpture on a daily basis, how they responded to the work. A questionnaire assessed their perceptions of harmony, as expressed by the installation as well as an alternative option – a living tree already planted in the courtyard but suggesting it to take a more prominent position. The questionnaire finally asked participants to indicate which among the sculpture, flower arrangement, or a tree best represented harmony between nature, heaven and people? The participants of questionnaire found it uncommon yet interesting when sculpture was placed in the center, making it the focus of attention. First, they saw it as a kind of novelty when its intent remained unexplained.



Figure 22. Installation of Harmonized Structure in Furniture Showroom Courtyard, Bangkok.

The following were asked amongst other questions:

- Without having read the explanation would you have understood that the sculpture is about harmony?
- Does the sculpture contribute to a sense of balance in the courtyard?
- Would adding live flowers improve its message of harmony between Nature, Heaven and People?
- Would planting a tree in the courtyard be a better way to communicate harmony between Nature, Heaven?

Nos.	Questions	Agree %	Neutral %	Don't Know %	Disagree
1	Without having read my explanation, would you have understood that the sculpture is about harmony?	22	50	28	0
2	Does the sculpture contribute to a sense of balance in the courtyard?	33	39	6	22
3	Would adding living flowers improve its message of harmony between Nature, Heaven, and People?	57	28	17	2
4	Does the sculpture communicate something positive?	33	44	6	17
5	Do you feel that art is important for interior design?	78	11	6	5
6	Would planting a tree in the courtyard be a better way to communicate harmony between Nature, Heaven, and People?	67	28	5	0
7	Is there anything in the sculpture that you would like to see me improve upon or change?	22	67	11	0

Figure 23. Table of questionnaire's results.

Findings Results

The questionnaire response demonstrated clearly the preference for the living tree, with 67% of participants selecting it as the most effective embodiment of harmony. The flower arrangement and the abstract sculpture received 18% and 15%, respectively. Qualitative feedback indicated that participants were moved by the living, organic presence of the tree, and others also situated in the courtyard, that associated with vitality, growth, and a direct connection to nature. In contrast, the sculpture was viewed as intellectually stimulating and aesthetically significant but less emotionally resonant. Suggesting placement of flower

arrangements, the employees welcomed Ikebana for its artistry and cultural significance but considered these more fragile and transient.

Findings suggest that while abstract and traditional art forms communicate philosophical concepts, living natural elements evoke a more visceral and holistic sense of harmony in urban spatial contexts.

Constructing Harmony

Results of this study highlight the human preference for living natural elements when expressing harmony within urban commercial spaces. The selected choice of the living tree over both the abstract sculpture and traditional Ikebana arrangement can be explained through a trifecta of psychological, cultural, and environmental factors.

Psychologically, living trees offer restorative benefits grounded in the theory of biophilia, where innate human affinity for nature, facilitates emotional comfort, and sensory engagement. To the contrary, sculptures are intellectually engaging but miss the organic vitality. A tree's presence activates a direct sensory and emotional connection to life and growth, which is deeply embedded in the needs of human experience and wellbeing.

From a cultural perspective, the preferred choice aligns with Ikebana's core principles which emphasize balance, symmetry, and harmony between heaven, earth, and humanity. The living tree embodies these elements physically as it is rooted in earth, grows upwards towards heaven, and interacts dynamically with people. It offers a continuous symbol of harmony that fluctuates rather than remains static. This living, evolving form contrasts with more fixed, abstract sculptures, reinforcing the concept of harmony as a dynamic process rather than a permanent state.

Trees contribute tangible benefits to urban spaces such as air purification, shade from sunlight, connection to nature and biodiversity promotion of the environment. These factors elevate the tree beyond mere aesthetics to an essential component of urban harmony.



Figure 24. Kojimachi Terrace, Japan, by Nendo.

An eleven storey commercial building is designed by Japanese studio Nendo, the balconies are filled with plants to "let the outside in." Office workers can enjoy balconies designed as timber-lined pods, filled with large plants and small trees.

In Kojimachi Terrace, on the three top floors, the balconies have been aligned to create a "Sky Forest" where people can come to enjoy a peaceful hideaway.



Figure 25. Lenne office, Estonia, by KAMP Arhitektid.

KAMP Arhitektid created an office space with the ambience of a "bright summer forest," with living tree trunks, artificial leaves and branches. Small leaves started growing miraculously after a week, said architect Jan Skolimowski, 2021. Despite human control, nature always tried to reconnect life in any environment possible.

Discussion

Nature prevails in its movement towards equilibrium. Still, can balance and harmony be given a man-made form integrating Ikebana's principles? Is harmony really a dynamic balance, a push and pull relationship between various aspects such as lines, blocks, front and back, high and low, centered and off center, fragile and strong, activated and not activated space? When juxtaposing abstract steel lines and blocks against an arrangement, Ikebana's fundamental theme of the harmonious union between nature and humanity becomes clear.

In both the Japanese Ikebana flower arrangement and structuring a steel composition in space, the basic vertical-horizontal and color elements represent the balance of essential opposing forces, be they yin and yang, dynamic and static, or positive and negative. Even the stillness is deceptive, a quietude only achieved by opposing forces. Harmony becomes a tensioned balance. Various schools of Ikebana follow the principles of silence in natural forms, minimalism from Buddhist precepts, graceful lines, found forms, reflection of feelings, Japanese aesthetics, and order or structure of heaven, earth, and humanity. Utilizing the negative space, the empty space, is an important component in achieving harmony and balance in its composition. Similarly, working with geometric shapes produces a sense of harmony and balance with the negative space between lines are important in its overall composition. I deliberately played with the pull and push effects, some metal lines, that form the rectangles hang apart from once connecting pieces. The sculpture seems to display a "floating effect" of blocks, spacing out with size. When the metal outlines are empty, the space they occupy becomes invisible, but that does not indicate the non-existence of

blocks but rather the invisibility communicates the existence of space albeit one that is not visually defined. If it had been flowers, or flowers incorporated with the sculpture, it would have provided a softer and comfortable harmonizing essence to beautify the environment.

The interplay of space - empty or decorated, active or not - is the largest different difference between East and West - what seems just like a background to a Western eye, is considered a resonant space in Japan. A tear room (Chasitsu) is in itself an activated structure in space, delineated by the movements of its visitors. Therefore, the non-activated a space combined with the activated space creates a dynamic, a push and pull between field, not unfilled, busy or empty i.e. the unseen resounds.

The space around my sculpture and the flower of Ikebana is activated quietly, existing in dialogue between object and emptiness. Rozhin said that 'to provide a balance of space, white blocks are carefully included in the experiment to achieve balance and harmony, akin to the "unseen" in Ikebana, which is not empty space but rather a sustained spiritual fullness.' (2013). The sculpture, could, as the Ikebana, operate as a meditation and a longing expression for harmony.

At first glance, sculpture appears to represent a Confucian ideal of harmony - a clean and methodical order. A Japanese approach suggests that harmony forms by opposites, by tension and conflict. The West's idea of harmony expects it to be orderly, by quietly accommodating diversity through control. Tak -lap Yeung argues that harmony exists both in diversity and conciliation, where both can represent something beautiful (2020). Yet, in nature, harmony superimposed by control is an impossibility. Nature rots, and comes alive again, just as an Ikebana arrangement is made from dead flowers made alive. That perfect order, a static snippet of nature is instead a dynamic equilibrium and in the process of change.

Conclusion

This practice-led art project demonstrates that while the modern world can be out of balance, solace is found in realizing that harmony is a dynamic process, an equilibrium of wavering forces and thus can be re-instated to embrace an evolving reconciliation of opposing forces rather than a static ideal. Through the principles of Japanese Ikebana and the design of a tea room, the Chasitsu, the study illuminates how living natural forms can embody harmony to a greater extent in urban commercial spaces than abstract or traditional art alone.

The preference for trees over sculptures among the audience reflects deep psychological needs, cultural symbolism, and environmental realities that collectively enrich urban experiences. These insights suggest that integrating living natural elements into art and design, enhances aesthetic appeal and promotes emotional well-being and sustainable urbanism.

Ultimately, this research contributes to expanding the discourse on art, nature, and cultural design, advocating for a harmonious coexistence of living environments and creative practices that honor both tradition and contemporary complexity.

Tensions can be peaceful, as deceptively still as an Ikebana arrangement. By probing Ikebana through its principles and translating these into a sculpture, the belief shifts from the notion that 'harmony' must be still by incorporating symmetry, balance, and unity and that a living sculpture, a flower arrangement or a tree, in the end, does it best when it comes to balancing a space. Harmony emerges when there is a need to align and embrace disunity.

Nevertheless, the outcome of this experiment brought to life new compositions that bring about harmony in abstract art with floating, colored structures in space and the fundamental structure found in Ikebana. Harmony can be given a form with similar values to those that underpin Ikebana processes: an asymmetrical composition, inspired by nature, and common interest in humanity. Ultimately, harmony arises through a reconciliation between opposing and conflicting parts, through the push and pull of change. Nature is not static, nor does it exert power in hard shiny surfaces rather it works through softer forms, in shapes that often curve softly. Tetsunori Kawana believes that life and beauty are transitory and, therefore, his Ikebana installations must also be "only for the time and place." A flower arrangement reminds us that we are fragile, yet we endure. Steel has its place, but can never replace the harmony embodied by life, in the living sculptures of trees or flowers.

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New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines

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Abstract

This research on the New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines aims to investigate the history and craftsmanship of Sangkhalok production, highlighting its distinctive features to guide future developments. It seeks to collect contemporary concepts that resonate with today's audience by engaging the younger generation to establish set guidelines for creating figurines of the new generation. The study employs participatory learning theory, involving a group of Generation Z participants aged 8-15 from three schools. These participants designed figurines based on their ideas, which were then evaluated by experts to determine the best design principles. The refined designs are being incorporated into the local production process in preserving cultural significance, resulting in the creation of New Generation Sangkhalok figurines. These contemporary art pieces are deeply rooted in traditional wisdom, yet they also mirror contemporary lifestyles. They captivate the imagination of Gen Z, innocence, and artistic sensibilities.

Keywords: *Sangkhalok, Figurines, Ceramic Community Enterprise Groups, Generation Z, Participatory design, Cultural Preservation, Thailand*

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Introduction

Sukhothai Province, Thailand is considered a historical site with important ancient monuments, such as Sukhothai Historical Park and Si Satchanalai Historical Park. Archaeological evidence and artifacts of great value have been found. The province also has unique traditions, arts, culture, and wisdom, leading to recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site that attracts Thai and foreign tourists. Additionally, Sukhothai is famous for its products known since ancient times, particularly Sangkhalok ware, dating back, around the 13th century CE, a distinctive type of pottery representing important economic value through local wisdom. Initially produced within communities, it was mainly used for household items such as cups, bowls, plates, jars, and roof tiles. The popular color was olive green, often without patterns, though some pieces had sgraffito or scratched designs of common motifs like flowers and leaves. Besides household use, Sangkhalok was also produced for ceremonial purposes, including religious statues and figurines, and figurines known as "broken-headed dolls."

Archaeological sites reveal diverse Sangkhalok figurines that reflect the culture and lifestyle of people at that time. These include humans and animals in various postures, such as a woman holding a baby, a man holding a fighting cock, and a figure with swollen cheeks as if chewing betel. They also show beliefs and influences from neighboring countries, like human-animal hybrids reflecting the Burmese belief in Narasimha. Sangkhalok figurines have grown alongside Thai society, originally made as children's toys or for relaxation and community bonding. However, changing lifestyles have led to their decline in everyday cultural contexts, now mainly collected by a small group of enthusiasts.

This research aims to revive the importance of Sangkhalok figurines in reflecting social life through contemporary art, involving the younger generation in presenting updated versions called "New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines." The study focuses on Generation Z, known for their constant access to global culture and high internet and social media usage. This generation is capable of creating new trends and movements for social causes. The image and characteristics of Generation Z are described as undefined differences, open to creativity and experimentation, daring to live differently while valuing knowledge connection and story sharing. By involving this group in initiating new ideas of New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines, the project aims to reflect and intergrade current trends and Thai society, bridging the charm of historical artifacts and contemporary life and society. It also explores the possibility of expanding into the contemporary art market as art toys, adding business value. The goal is to instill pride in Thai art, foster learning and understanding of Thai cultural roots from new perspectives by blending modern culture and ideas with distinctive and culturally valuable art through preserving, continuing, and developing.

Research Objectives

- To study the history and craftsmanship behind Sangkhalok figurines with an aim to identify distinctive features and requirements for future product development
- To collaborate with Gen Z in gathering ideas and establishing guidelines for creating new generation of Sangkhalok figurines that resonate with contemporary contexts.
- To create new generation Sangkhalok figurines, merging elements that mirror lifestyles of the target audiences with the traditional characteristics of Sangkhalok figurines in a modern artistic expression.

Research Methodology

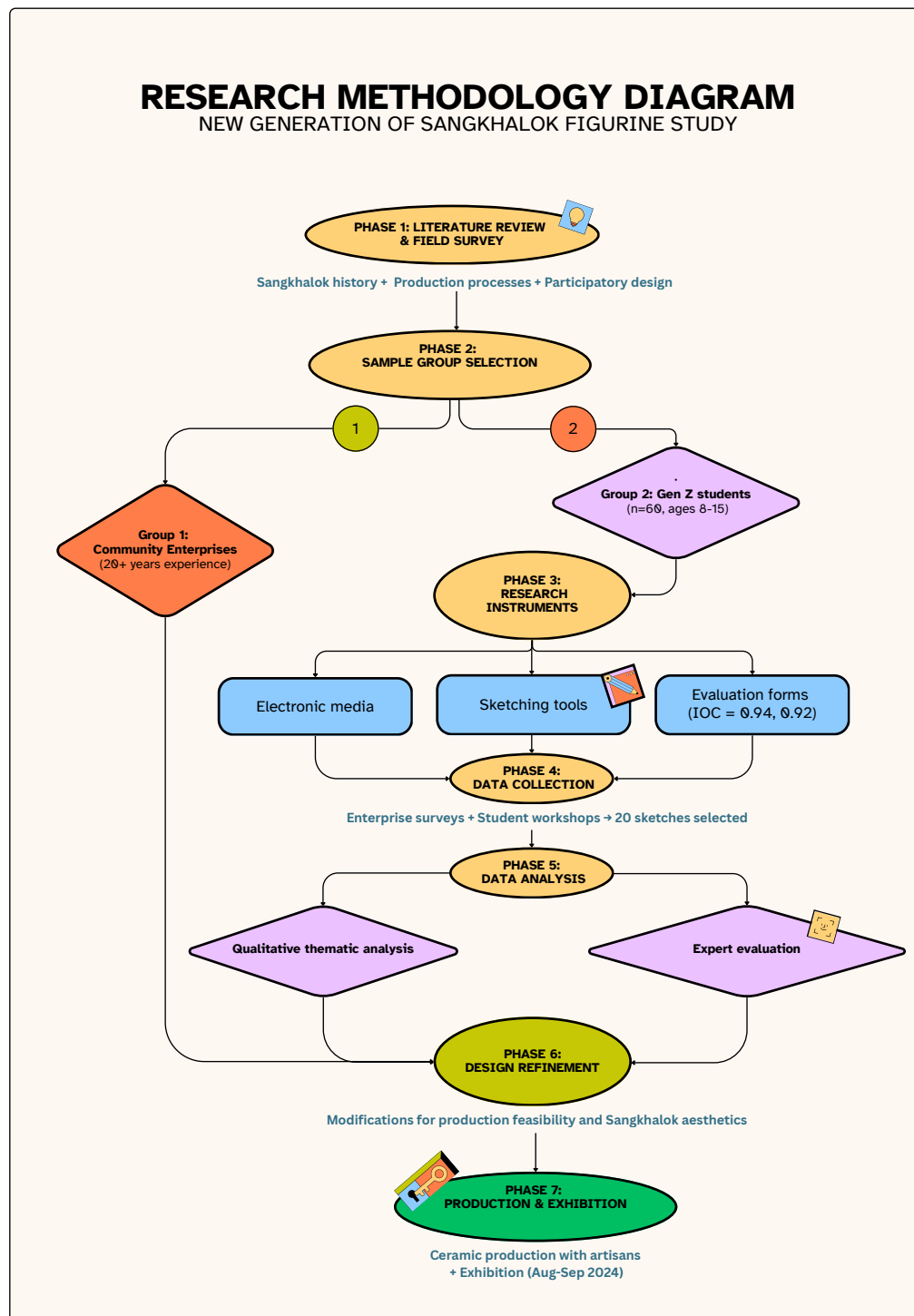


Figure 1. Research Methodology Diagram showing the seven-phase research process for developing New Generation Sangkhalok Figurines. Image by author.

Literature Review and Field Surveys

- The evolution of Sangkhalok figurines, from their production process in the past to the present day. This includes field surveys study in Sukhothai province.
- The Sangkhalok community enterprises in Sukhothai province, focusing on processes, production capacity, and product styles spanning from past to present.
- Participatory design approaches involve gathering information from books, documents, theses, and related research.

Define and Select Sample Groups According to the Criteria

There are two sample groups in this research:

Sangkhalok ceramic community enterprise groups in Sukhothai province, with the following selection criteria:

- Over 20 years of experience in Sangkhalok production
- Complete production cycle and consistent, locally recognized work
- Willingness to cooperate in developing new products while maintaining Sangkhalok characteristics

New generation group, with the following selection criteria:

- Generation Z population, born between 1998-2011, focusing on ages 8-15, currently studying from late elementary to early high school
- Randomly selected from various communities regardless of background to increase diversity of perspectives and definitions of modern social contexts

Based on these criteria, 60 participants were randomly selected by teachers from each school, 20 students per school, from three schools: Wat U-ya School in Suphan Buri Province, Patumwan Demonstration School in Bangkok, and Sukhothai Wittayakom School in Sukhothai

Create Research Instruments

This qualitative research aims to collect data on Sangkhalok figurine designs illustrated by Generation Z participants. There are three research instruments: 1) Electronic media, 2) Sketches of Sangkhalok figurines illustrated by the participants, and 3) Sketch evaluation forms. The research instruments were created as follows:

- Create electronic media by studying and collecting data on Sangkhalok figurines' history, characteristics, styles, and production processes from books, journals, articles, documents, and related research on participatory learning theory. This electronic media provides basic knowledge about Sukhothai Sangkhalok figurines, their history, importance, styles, and production processes, as well as the research objectives and steps, leading to brainstorming for the sample group to participate in designing new Sangkhalok figurines based on their creativity. The electronic media offers foundational information on Sangkhalok figurines, covering their historical background, cultural significance, distinctive styles, and manufacturing methods. These are gathered from a variety of sources such as books, journals, articles, documents, and relevant research on participatory learning theory. The media also outlines the research objectives and methods which involve brainstorming sessions for the participants to engage their creativity and illustrate new Sangkhalok figurines.
- Sketching tools includes drawing, coloring utensils and A3 paper. The A3 paper is divided into two parts. Part 1: General information about the samples such as grade, school, and age. Part 2: Covers the creative Sangkhalok figurine design
- Sketch evaluation form employs Likert Rating Scales to select suitable works from the participants' sketches, in considering of design composition, aesthetics, creativity, and how well they reflect the lifestyle and activities of Generation Z in current society (2024).

Three experts then reviewed the research instruments to assess their validity. The Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) for electronic media and sketching tools reached 0.94, while the sketch evaluation form, it was 0.92. All research instruments displayed validity values ranging from 0.50-1.00, within the acceptable range for use. The tools were then subsequently submitted to the research ethics committee for review.

Data Collection

There are two data collection parts in this research:

- ***Sangkhalok ceramic community enterprise groups in Sukhothai province***
Surveying Sangkhalok ceramic community enterprise groups in Sukhothai province to investigate various aspects such as number of entrepreneurs, product styles, production processes, and raw materials used from the past to the present. It also delves into observing developments and changes over time, and covers examination of Sangkhalok figurine styles, sizes, and popularity.
- ***New generation group***
Collecting data process involved using electronic media to educate students about Sangkhalok figurines. This was followed by a design session where 60 students from three schools created new figurine concepts. Students then casted their votes on their favorite designs, resulting in the selection of 30 outstanding sketches. Experts assessed these selections according to specific criteria and feasibility of production. The chosen designs were carefully examined, leading to the creation of contemporary Sangkhalok figurines in the next research phase.

Data Analysis and Design Process

The data analysis and design process consisted of a multi-stage approach. First, qualitative analysis was conducted on the student sketches to identify contemporary themes and preferences. Expert evaluations were then analyzed to align new ideas with practical implementation. These findings were synthesized to form design guidelines that merged traditional Sangkhalok features with contemporary appeal. An iterative design process was implemented, where models were created and refined by the researcher, taking into account feedback from experts, Sangkhalok ceramic production, and the target audience. The final designs were assessed for production feasibility with local artisans. Detailed documentation was consistently recorded throughout this process to capture design development and the reasoning behind the design, serving as a valuable resource for future development in this area.

Literature Review

The research on New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines has studied relevant concepts, theories, and research as follows:

- Studied and researched the history, significance, and production process of Sangkhalok figurines from the past to the present by gathering information from books, documents, theses, and research related to the development of Sangkhalok ceramics, as well as conducting field surveys in Sukhothai province.
- Studied Sangkhalok community enterprises in Sukhothai province with a focus on their processes, production capacity, and product styles from the past to the present.

- Studied the evolution of Sangkhalok figurine styles from the past to the present through relevant literatures and conducting field surveys to explore current styles of Sangkhalok figurines.
- Studied information and instruction about Participatory Design approaches by acquiring data from books, documents, theses, and related research.

Sangkhalok Figurines

Sangkhalok is a type of ceramic ware originating from the Sukhothai period, dating back to the 13th century CE. Initially produced within communities, it was mainly used for household items such as cups, bowls, plates, jars, and roof tiles. The popular color was olive green, often without patterns, yet certain pieces featured scratched or incised natural motifs. Besides household use, Sangkhalok was also crafted for ceremonial purposes, such as water containers, religious statues, urns, and figurines. By the 14th century, the quality had improved, leading to exports and generating significant economic value and reputation that continues to the present day.

Evidence was found at the kiln site known as "Figurine Group" in Ban Pa Yang, Si Satchanalai. They depict humans and animals in various postures, with diverse glazing techniques. It's believed that they were used as toys, decorations, or in rituals. These figurines serve as significance evidence illustrating the lifestyle, traditional attire, beliefs, and customs of people during that period. For example, female figurines holding children represent culture perspectives on guardian spirits. Animal figurines, on the other hand, are associated with offerings made to household spirits. Additionally, figurines with broken-headed were used in ceremonial practices aimed at warding off illnesses. The figurines also showcase the fashion trends of the era, such as hairstyles, accessories, and attire for both genders.



Figure 2. Variety of Original Sangkhalok Figurines. Image Courtesy of Sustainable Arts and Crafts Institute of Thailand.

Process and Methods of Producing Sangkhalok Figurines in Sukhothai Province

1. Clay Preparation: Local clay is well-rested, air-dried, and then wedged for forming. The clay used is sourced from two local sources:

- Si Satchanalai clay: White stoneware or kaolin found at Khao Si Lan mountain, mixed with paddy field clay. After firing, it has a creamy white color.
- Sukhothai clay: Found at Rong Pla Lai, it has a gray color due to its high iron oxide content.

2. Forming Method: The figurines are formed by pinching and pressing techniques to shape animal figures or various postures. The body is shaped first, followed by the head, arms, and legs. The forming is simple without complex details. The dimensions of the pieces usually range from 15 to 20 centimeters in height.

3. Bisque Firing: Fired at 800°C for 8-14 hours in a gas kiln.

4. Glazing: After bisque firing, the pieces are glazed. The Sangkhalok glaze is unique as it contains wood ash from burnt wood. The color is determined by the type of wood ash used: tamarind wood ash provides white, noni wood ash produces red, and oak wood ash yields green.

5. Glaze Firing: The glazed figurines are fired at 1,200°C for 10-16 hours in a gas kiln.

Study of Styles and Characteristics of Sangkhalok Figurines

Historically, Sangkhalok figurines were mostly created for use as toys or in rituals based on beliefs. The figurines imitate familiar things such as people in different poses, pets, or domestic animals used for transportation and agriculture. The forming style is simple, formed by pinching and pressing, with uncomplicated details that are easy comprehensible. They communicate and reflect the way of life, innocence, childlikeness, and naivety, which are characteristic of Naive Art.

From the survey of Sangkhalok figurine appearances at production sites in Mueang Kao Subdistrict, Mueang District, and Si Satchanalai District, Sukhothai Province, carried out on April 29-30, 2024, the figurines can be classified into two styles: animal figures and human figures in various postures.



Figure 3. Sangkhalok figurines from Sukhothai Province found at Bua Sangkhalok shop (left) and Suwat Sangkhalok shop (right). Image by author.

Study of Traditional Kilns and Firing Processes

Historically, Sangkhalok pieces were fired in kilns known as "Turieng kilns," which employed two types of heat flow (drafts):

- Up-draft Kilns: These circular kilns were consisted of two sections:
 1. **Ware Chamber:** Located at the top area, approximately 1.5 meters in diameter. Ceramic pieces were placed in this part with broken ceramic pieces stacked on top to slow heat flow.

2. Fire Chamber: The fuel area where heat rose upward, featuring a protruding opening for convenient fuel loading. Between the ware chamber and chimney, there was a perforated clay disc known as a "Ta-krub plate," was positioned. The disc measured 15-20 cm in thickness and featured holes with diameters ranging from 5-10 cm. It was upheld by clay stands situated inside the fire chamber.

- **Cross-draft Kilns:** Also known as "Pratun kilns," these kilns featured an oval shape with a flat floor and an arched roof that resembling a boat canopy. They were typically inclined 10-30 degrees and comprised two sections:

1. Fire Chamber: Located at the lowest front section, with a horseshoe-shaped opening.

2. Ware Chamber: In the center area, which is the widest part and slope from front towards the chimney. The floor was covered with 10-15 cm of sand to embed supports for the pieces.

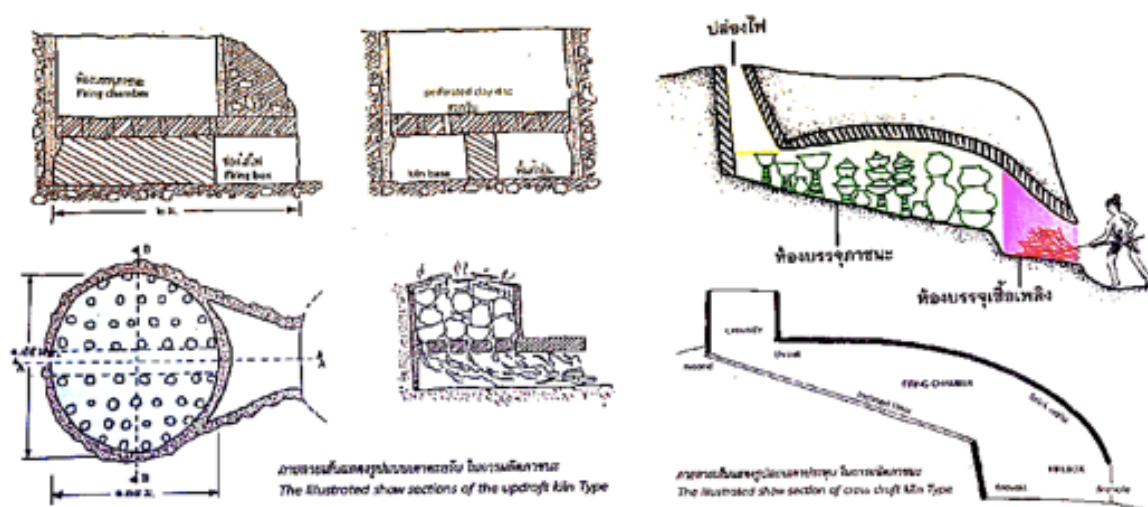


Figure 4. The Illustrated show sections of the updraft and cross draft kiln types found at Sangkhalok Kiln Study and Conservation Center. Image by author.

A field survey of The Sangkhalok Community Enterprise Groups in Sukhothai province on April 29-30, 2024, revealed that Turieng kilns are no longer in used due to the scarcity of wood fuel, Inconsistent temperature control, and the need for expertise for operation. Consequently, producers have transitioned to using gas kilns as an alternative fuel source for firing Sangkhalok pieces.

Survey of Sukhothai Sangkhalok Community Enterprises

Based on field research conducted on April 28-29, 2024, to survey community enterprises and entrepreneurs producing Sangkhalok ceramics in two locations:

- Mueang Kao Subdistrict, Mueang District, Sukhothai Province, including Suthep Sangkhalok, Ganesha, Bua Sangkhalok, Usa Sangkhalok, and Sangkhalok Art
- Si Satchanalai District, including Suwat Sangkhalok, Ketanong Sangkhalok, and Pa Thong-in Sangkhalok



Figure 5. Survey of Sukhothai Sangkhalok Community Enterprises: Mueang Kao Subdistrict, Mueang District, Sukhothai Province. Images by author.

The survey of community enterprises and entrepreneurs engaged in producing Sangkhalok ceramics in Mueang Kao Subdistrict, Mueang District, Sukhothai Province revealed that production process takes place within family- oriented business 5-15 members. Regarding the production process, it is noted that only a few producers still use local clay mixed into the sculpting clay. Most producers have adjusted their practices by using prefabricated clay sourced from factories and clay sourced from Chiang Mai and Lampang provinces, which is more convenient and standardized. This leads to reduction of work steps and time, considering the limited of available workforce for handling local clay, which requires processes like clay resting, drying, preparing, and clay testing. It also helps in preventing issues associated with product explosion from local clay that may lack consistent quality control. Besides changes in clay sourcing, a transition to gas kiln from traditional kilns have been observed in firing techniques. Thus shift aims to reduce constraints relating to expenses, time, and space, as well as confronting the challenge posed by the scarcity and elevated costs of firewood previously used as fuel sources.



Figure 6. Survey of Sukhothai Sangkhalok Community Enterprises: Si Satchanalai District, Sukhothai Province. Images by author.

The survey conducted on groups and entrepreneurs engaged in production of Sangkhalok ceramics in Si Satchanalai District shown that Sangkhalok enterprises also operate as family-run businesses. Many of these establishments have ceased as a consequence of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and lack of successors, given that younger generations exhibit a preference for alternative occupations. Production capacity has decreased to only 2-4 family members, leading to smaller operations in comparison to Mueang Kao District. However, they continue to use locally sourced clay and foothill clay that they dig up themselves, then soak, rest, and dry in preparation for molding products according to traditional production processes. This results in distinctive attributes that are exclusive to local clay, which turns red or reddish-brown after firing.

Product styles from both districts, as well as animal and human figurines and functional vessels, which have been continuously produced, now encompass deity statues and figurines modeled inspired by antiquities. They also feature the distinctive fish pattern of Sangkhalok painted on utensils. In addition to the fish, floral patterns and foliage designs are presented Sukhothai Sangkhalok work, characteristics that are considered unique to this style.

Based on the study and field research, it can be concluded that community enterprise operators have altered their production methods from previous practices due to economic, social, and cultural changes, as well as market demands. Originally producing pottery, plates, bowls, decorated vessels, and figurines that imitated antiques, the local producers now also produce statues and deity figures for worship, such as Ganesh, Naga, and lions, in order to cater to specific target groups and markets that have a preference for sacred object worship. Most entrepreneurs cater to custom orders for customers from the Baby Boomer generation. The enterprises are experiencing a lack of new/fresh ideas for product development, particularly concerning Sangkhalok figurines with distinctive characteristics that are marketable and appeal to Generation X and Y customers or newer generations. Developing products to expand the market base and attract interest from newer generations would contribute significantly to adding value and passing on the unique cultural wisdom for new generations to uphold.

Due to the pandemic situation and changes in industrial production that once relied on handcrafts, as along with rapid technological advancements resulting in introduction of machinery and various innovations, many entrepreneurs have closed their businesses due to changing trends and the severe impact of pandemic situation. Currently, Sukhothai Sangkhalok community enterprises have adapted complete production processes, from clay preparation to molding, firing methods, ash glazing, and production styles. These all are employed in a manner to maintain traditional Sangkhalok characteristics by using traditional clay and glazes. Changes include the switch of clay sources for convenience and shifting from traditional Turieng kilns to gas kilns owing to the growing scarcity of firewood fuel. However, all still maintain the essence of Sangkhalok through traditional designs and patterns.

From the field survey and discussions with Sangkhalok community enterprises in Sukhothai province, it was determined that “Suthep Sangkhalok” is a community enterprise that willing to collaborate with designers to produce new-generation Sangkhalok figurines,

creating from children's creativity. After conducting a survey of the actual areas, related design theories were studied to meet requirements of the target group to identify collaborative approaches through studying theories associated with participatory design theory.

Participatory Design

Participatory design is an excellent approach for engaging Generation Z in reimagining Sangkhalok figurines, as it establishes a significant bridge between ancient local wisdom and contemporary youth culture. Here is how and why this approach is particularly effective:

- **Empowerment and Ownership:** Through the direct inclusion of Gen Z directly in the design process, they acquire a sense of ownership over the cultural heritage. This personal connection increases the possibility that they will value and conserve the tradition of Sangkhalok figurines.
- **Fresh Perspectives:** Gen Z contributes distinct, tech-savvy, and internationally-influenced perspectives to discussions. Their ideas can breathe new life into traditional designs, making them more relevant and appealing to younger audiences.
- **Cultural Continuity:** The participatory process facilitates a direct transfer of knowledge from artisans to young designers. This interaction ensures that the essence of Sangkhalok craftsmanship is comprehended and respected while being reinterpreted.
- **Digital Integration:** Gen Z's natural affinity for digital technologies can lead to innovative ways of marketing, designing, or even producing Sangkhalok figurines, potentially broadening their market reach and attractiveness.
- **Cross-generational Learning:** The collaboration between traditional artisans and young designers creates a two-way learning environment. Artisans acquire knowledge regarding current trends and technologies, while Gen Z gains appreciation for craftsmanship and cultural significance.
- **Relevance to Modern Life:** Gen Z has a potential to assist in identifying ways to make Sangkhalok figurines relevant to modern lifestyles, such as through reconceptualization of their use or instigation of elements from pop culture.
- **Storytelling and Marketing:** Young participants can craft compelling narratives around the figurines, leveraging social media and digital platforms to share the story of Sangkhalok to a worldwide audience.
- **Global-Local Connection:** Gen Z's global outlook can assist in positioning Sangkhalok figurines within a broader cultural context, potentially increasing their appeal to international markets.

Theoretical Framework for Participatory Design

This study is grounded in two key theoretical approaches that inform the methodology of engaging Generation Z in the reconceptualization of Sangkhalok figurines:

Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation

Hart's model (1992) provides a framework for understanding and evaluating youth participation in projects and decision-making processes. The ladder consists of eight rungs, each representing increasing levels of youth engagement:

- 1) Manipulation
- 2) Decoration
- 3) Tokenism
- 4) Assigned but Informed

- 5) Consulted and Informed
- 6) Adult-initiated, Shared Decisions with Youth
- 7) Youth-initiated and Directed
- 8) Youth-initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults

For this study, the researcher aimed to operate within the higher rungs of the ladder (6-8), where youth are actively participating in decision-making processes, either by collaborating with adults or by initiating projects themselves. This approach ensures that Generation Z participants have genuine agency in the redesign of Sangkhalok figurines.

Participatory Learning Theory

Participatory Learning Theory, as described by scholars like Paulo Freire (1970) and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), emphasizes the importance of active engagement in the learning process. Key principles include:

- a) A Learner-centered approach: Focusing on the experiences, knowledge, and interests of the learners.
- b) Active participation: Engaging learners in hands-on activities and decision-making processes.
- c) Experiential learning: Drawing on and creating new experiences as a basis for learning.
- d) Collaborative learning: Emphasizing interaction and knowledge sharing among participants.
- e) Reflective practice: Encouraging ongoing reflection on the learning process and outcomes.

In the context of this study, Participatory Learning Theory informs the design of workshops and collaborative sessions, ensuring that Generation Z participants are not merely recipients of knowledge about Sangkhalok figurines, but active co-creators in the process of reimagining this cultural artifact.

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, this study aims to establish a robust participatory design process that engages Generation Z participants meaningfully, honors their perspectives and creativity, and facilitates a genuine exchange of knowledge and ideas between traditional artisans and young designers.

Examples of Participatory Design Activities

IKEA's initiative involves transforming children's drawings into cuddly toys, with proceeds going to charity: IKEA has created a special project to manufacture uniquely designed stuffed animals inspired by illustrations submitted by children worldwide. The process involved a competition among children from 40 cities, resulting in over 1,000 submissions. Children were asked to design their "Dream Toy" on paper, which was then selected by designers. The toys designed by children were novel, naive, and simplicity, easy-to-understand forms. After selection process, prototypes were made to ensure accuracy or make necessary adjustments before producing the final soft toys. The toys were then sent to the children who designed them, instilling pride in the young designers who won the competition. The toys were manufactured for commercial purposes, and the profits were allocated to support underprivileged children through UNICEF projects. This activity instilled a sense of pride in the children who created the designs and raised social awareness (Cameron Keady, 2015).



Figure 7. IKEA's Dream toy project. Image Courtesy of https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ikea-kids-design-plushy-toys-charity_n_5630f9c7e4b0c66bae5a6e2c.

Children's furniture design project by Jack Beveridge and Joshua Lake: These designers collaborated with a local primary school, involving 8-year-old students in an art class activity. With the simple prompt "Please draw a chair," children were asked to draw and color chairs. The designers then transformed these pure imaginative drawings from 8-year-olds into actual functional chairs for children.



Figure 8. Children's furniture design project by Jack Beveridge and Joshua Lake. Image Courtesy of <https://www.designboom.com/art/childrens-drawings-made-into-furniture/>.

The project "Turning senior citizens into superheroes" project led by designer Yoni Lefevre: This project aimed to portray an elderly in a vibrant light. Children often view them as

superheroes especially their grandparents, in their hearts. The designer asked children to draw their grandparents on paper. These drawings were then scanned, edited, and converted into life-sized photographs. Local seniors were invited to see how children envision them and were requested to pose in accordance with the photographs while wearing costumes and props produced from the drawings. This activity instilled pride in the children and fostered a sense of value and a lively image of the elderly within the community.



Figure 9. Turning senior citizens into superheroes project by Yoni Lefevre. Image Courtesy of <https://www.today.com/news/artist-brings-kids-drawings-life-turning-senior-citizens-superheroes-2d11603758>.

These creative activities, which involve children or community participation, contribute to the enhancement of value for both children and the community. They foster sense of unity, love within the community, and raise awareness regarding the inherent value present within the community.

Data Collection

The data collection methodology for the research on New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines embodies key principles of participatory design, effectively bridging traditional Thai ceramic wisdom with contemporary youth culture. By engaging students in the late elementary to early high school, students stage in creative design and decision-making processes, the study aligns with higher levels of Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation. The combination of digital learning, hands-on design activities, and collaborative decision-making reflects Participatory Learning Theory, cultivating active engagement and experiential learning. The inclusion of expert assessment strikes a balances between youthful creativity and practical feasibility, creating a synergy between the fresh perspectives of Generation Z and traditional expertise. This approach not only yields innovative designs but also cultivates cultural ownership among young participants. This could potentially ensuring the relevance and longevity of Sangkhalok art in contemporary society.

Data Collection Methodology

1) The researcher utilized electronic media to provide fundamental knowledge about Sangkhalok figurines. This approach was designed to stimulate learning and encourage brainstorming for the design of New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines in subsequent design sketches.

2) The questionnaires were distributed to a sample group of 60 school students, with 20 students from each of three schools located in Bangkok, Supanburi province, and Sukhothai province. Students were asked to create drawings of Sangkhalok figurines according

to their own imagination. The sample group was allotted one hour and thirty minutes to design their New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines.

3) After collecting the sketches, the sample group collectively chose their favorite designs. Each participant was provided with three stickers to place on the designs they liked. This process aimed to ascertain the top ten designs with the highest-scores from each school.

4) The thirty highest-scoring designs (ten from each school) were compiled and sent to three experts in ceramic design or product design, along with an evaluation form. These experts were assigned to choosing twenty top designs based on their appropriateness as per the evaluation criteria and feasibility for production.

5) The selected Sangkhalok figurine designs were then categorized, analyzed, and redraw by the researcher for the design of New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines in a contemporary context. The researcher categorized, analyzed, and redrawn the selected Sangkhalok figurine designs for the creation of the New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines in a contemporary context.

This methodology ensures a participatory approach, engaging both the target demographic (school students) and Sangkhalok ceramic community enterprise groups in Sukhothai province in the design process. This effectively bridges generational perspectives in the reconceptualized of this traditional art form.

Data Analysis and Design Process

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis of Sangkhalok figurine designs of Generation Z involved a multi-step process to extract meaningful insights from the sketches provided by the participants. Initially, each design was subjected to a thorough content analysis, examining subject matter, artistic style, distinctive features, and accompanying textual explanations. This granular approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of individual creative expressions. Subsequently, thematic grouping was employed to categorize designs based on emerging patterns, including subject matter (e.g., animal-inspired, technology-themed), aesthetic style (e.g., minimalist, whimsical), and cultural references (e.g., traditional Thai elements, global influences). To ensure a harmonious equilibrium between youthful creativity and practical feasibility, the analysis incorporated expert assessments of the top twenty designs, evaluating their display of Gen Z lifestyle, contemporary art style, appeal to the designated age group, and demonstration of naïve artistic attributes. Trend identification was staged, correlating popular design elements with expert approvals to pinpoint key features for the New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurines. Finally, a Generation Z context analysis was conducted to interpret the designs within the framework of contemporary youth culture. This analysis examined how traditional Sangkhalok elements were reimagined and how current Gen Z interests and values were reflected in the designs. This comprehensive analytical approach provided a nuanced understanding of how Generation Z envisions the evolution of Sangkhalok figurines, offering valuable insights for creating culturally relevant and youth-appealing designs that bridge traditional craftsmanship with contemporary aesthetics.

Thematic Analysis of Generation Z Sangkhalok Figurine Designs

The thematic analysis of the Sangkhalok figurine designs created by Generation Z participants uncovered three distinct categories: Contemporary Thai Cultural References, Global Influences, and Mimicking Cartoons or Animation. This categorization provided insights into how young designers blend traditional craftsmanship with modern aesthetics and global perspectives.

Contemporary Thai Cultural References

The designs in this category demonstrated a nuanced comprehension of Thai cultural heritage, reinterpreted through a contemporary perspective in the context of daily life of the participants. Participants frequently incorporated traditional Thai elements, such as the distinctive motifs like elephants, farmers, Thai fairies, or lotus flowers, but they contextualized them within modern Thai society. For instance, several designs featured Sangkhalok figurines either holding smartphones or wearing contemporary Thai attire, effectively linking the gap between ancient craft and contemporary lifestyle. This category also included references to current Thai pop culture, with certain designs drawing inspiration from popular Thai music artists or social media influencers. The integration of traditional and contemporary elements in these designs implies that Generation Z values their cultural heritage in high regard while trying to imbue it with relevance for their daily lives. This approach could prove notably effective in creating Sangkhalok figurines that resonate with young Thai consumers while maintaining a strong cultural identity.



Figure 10. Examples of sketch categorized in Contemporary Thai Cultural References. Images by author.

Global Influences

The influence of global culture on Sangkhalok figurine designs of Generation Z demonstrates a sophisticated fusion of international elements with traditional Thai craftsmanship. These designs reflect their digitally-connected worldview, incorporating elements

from social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, while embracing diverse cultural influences ranging from K-pop aesthetics to Western holiday motifs. Digital elements are prominently displayed in the designs, which include smartphones, emoji-inspired symbolism, and meme-based expressions. Additionally, K-pop influences are evident in contemporary hairstyles and fashion choices. Social consciousness also emerges as a key theme, with designs addressing global issues like climate change and social justice, often expressed through internationally recognized symbols and messages. This creative synthesis demonstrates natural ability of Generation Z to navigate multiple cultural contexts. It generates designs that maintain Thai authenticity while communicating in the universal language of contemporary youth culture. This indicates significant potential for enhancing the attractiveness of the traditional crafts in the global marketplace/platform.



Figure 11. Examples of sketch categorized in Global Influences. Images by author.

Mimicking Cartoons or Animation

The category inspired by Cartoon and Animation exhibited a profound influence of visual media on aesthetic preferences of Generation Z frequently manifesting as direct mimicry of popular animated characters and styles. Designs often featured exaggerated proportions, vibrant colors, and stylized features that are typical of well-known animation styles. Many sketches closely emulated specific cartoon characters from widely recognized franchises like Pokémon, Disney animations, or Japanese animations, whereas others created original characters heavily influenced by recognizable cartoon aesthetics. This tendency to mimic and remix existing animated characters and styles illustrates the generation's deep engagement with global visual media and indicates a strong affinity for familiar, media-inspired visuals. The popularity of this category suggests that designs that incorporate these well-known elements may have a strong appeal to younger consumers, engaging them through a visual language they find both recognizable and compelling.



Figure 12. Examples of sketch categorized in Mimicking Cartoons or Animation. Images by author.

The thematic analysis of these designs provides valuable insights for the development of New Generation Sangkhalok Figurines. It is suggested that successful designs may require a balance of traditional craftsmanship alongside contemporary relevance, global awareness, and influences from popular media. By incorporating elements from each of these categories, it may be possible to develop Sangkhalok figurines that not only appeal to Generation Z consumers but also serve as a bridge between Thailand's rich cultural heritage and the globalized, media-saturated world of today's youth. Future research could investigate the practically implemented of these thematic elements in figurine designs and their resonance with broader segments of the contemporary art market.

Design Process

From twenty sketches of Sangkhalok figurines designed by the participants, experts assessed and selected them using an evaluation form. The evaluation criteria were:

- 1) Reflecting the lifestyle and activities of Generation Z children in current society (2024)
- 2) Presenting an image and concept that reflects contemporary art styles
- 3) Meeting the requirements of Generation Z children aged 8-15 years in the current era as a toy
- 4) Demonstrating imagination, purity, and innocence (Naïve Art)

The design modification process addressed key challenges inherent in ceramic production, focusing, particularly on the material's fragile nature, while also maintaining traditional Sangkhalok characteristics. Three essential criteria guided the refinement of participant designs. First, shapes were simplified by removing delicate details that could easily break during production or handling, thus preserving the distinctive Sangkhalok ceramic aesthet-

ic. Second, the designs were modified to enhance stability, ensuring that each piece could stand securely without any risk of tipping over. Third, sketch details were refined to align with Sangkhalok ceramic stylistic elements, incorporating characteristic glazing patterns and surface treatments while ensuring efficient production processes.



Figure 13. Examples of design process. Images by author.

This methodical approach struck a crucial balance between preserving the participants' creative vision and meeting both manufacturing requirements and traditional Sangkhalok artistic standards. By making thoughtful modification to the designs, while maintaining their core aesthetic elements and Sangkhalok identity, the process ensured that the final pieces would be both producible and true to their original concepts. The resulting designs have elegantly united contemporary creative expression with the traditional constraints of Sangkhalok ceramic production. This exhibits that maintaining artistic integrity is achievable despite adapting to technical limitations and historical artistic conventions.



Figure 14. Production processes. Image by author.

Research Outcomes: New Generation of Sangkhalok Figurine Study

The exploring of enhancing Sangkhalok figurines yielded multiple significant achievements across cultural, educational, and social dimensions:

Cultural Heritage Integration

The research unveiled key features of traditional Sangkhalok figurines – namely their simplicity, lifestyle representation, and naïve art qualities, serving as vital foundations for contemporary reinterpretation. This comprehension established crucial parameters for modernization whilst upholding cultural authenticity.

Generational Engagement and Knowledge Transfer

- Implementation of participatory design methodology with Generation Z (ages 8-15) led meaningful engagement with cultural heritage
- Facilitated valuable knowledge exchange between young designers and traditional Sangkhalok artisans
- Established an intergenerational bridge vital for cultural preservation and evolution

Contemporary Adaptation and Innovation

The resulting designs successfully merged:

- Modern youth lifestyle elements
- Contemporary artistic concepts
- Traditional Sangkhalok craftsmanship techniques
- Generation Z aesthetic preferences

Educational Impact

The research process functioned as an active learning platform, demonstrating:

- Alignment with Vygotsky's developmental theory
- Enhanced creative expression opportunities
- Practical application of cultural knowledge
- Experiential learning through direct engagement

Cultural Sustainability Initiatives

- Established a collaborative framework with Sangkhalok community enterprise
- Developed production methodologies balancing tradition with innovation
- Created a pathway for continued cultural evolution and relevance

Public Engagement and Dissemination

The culminating exhibition at Chulalongkorn University Museum (August 27 - September 27, 2024) serves to:

- Showcase research outcomes
- Promote cultural preservation through innovation
- Demonstrate successful integration of traditional wisdom with contemporary design

These findings suggest a viable model for cultural preservation through active youth engagement and contemporary reinterpretation of traditional craft forms.



Figure 15. Examples of finished work. Images by author.

Recommendations for Cultural Heritage Innovation and Preservation

Strategic Implementation Recommendations

1. Incorporating innovation into Traditional Crafts

- Encouraging traditional craft communities to embrace contemporary design approaches
- Developing strategies to harmonize innovation with cultural authenticity
- Implementing channels for ongoing input from younger demographics
- Establishing sustainable production practice that respect traditional techniques while integrating modern efficiency

2. Model Expansion and Adaptation by Scaling the participatory design methodology across:

- Different age demographics
- Various community enterprises
- Multiple cultural craft forms
- Diverse geographical regions

Developing standardized yet flexible frameworks for implementation

Future Development Opportunities

1. Educational Integration

- Incorporate cultural craft programs into formal education curricula
- Develop workshop models for intergenerational knowledge transfer
- Create documentation systems for preserving traditional techniques

2. Community Engagement Enhancement

- Facilitate continuous dialogue between traditional craftspeople and young designers
- Establish platforms for sustained innovation and feedback
- Implement mentorship programs connecting experienced artisans with young learners

This research demonstrates the efficacy of engagement young individuals in the preservation of cultural heritage by means of innovative product development. The methodology serves as a reproducible framework for cultural preservation initiatives, particularly those aimed at younger demographics. Success lies in the considerate balance between honoring traditional practices and embracing contemporary relevance, thereby ensuring cultural sustainability through the active participation of future generations.

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Local Material Practice as a Collective Spatial System *in a Craft Neighborhood*

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how spatial production occurs within local material practices as socially and spatially structured phenomenon. Discourses in local material practice often emphasized the repetitive production processes as cultural expressions; however, the spatial dimension of these practices remains under-explored. Understanding how space is produced and utilized in the process of making '*gerabah*' as one of the original Indonesian pottery crafts in Yogyakarta provides new insight into the ecological, social, and technological systems that sustain local communities. This research is important to bridge the knowledge between cultural production studies and spatial analysis within the context of local craft industries. The main objective explores how local craftspeople organize and utilize space throughout the stages of material transformation, and how these spatial practices reflect, sustain, and shape collective systems of production and cultural identity. Based on data collected through field observation and semi-structured interview among craftsmen in Kasongan Village, this study employs spatial reading as an analytical approach to understand how space is produced. The result suggests that by analyzing the interrelations between spatial layers, such as production zones, organizational structures, and dynamic operational patterns may reveal the underlying logic of spatial organization embedded in traditional craft environments.

Keywords: *Production of Space, Spatial Reading, Material Practice, Dynamic, Collective System*

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Introduction

The understanding of architectural space has evolved significantly, particularly concerning social and spatial practices. Earlier discourse was more focused on the definition of “what is space?”. Space is defined as an abstract, geometric and functional entities (Giedion, 2009; Holm, 2020) and treated as container or background. While shifting from pure form to sensory form, the space is still about architectural expression. Meanwhile, other foundational thinking about space as socially produced. Lefebvre (1991) introduced the idea that space is not neutral container. Space is produced through social relations (Robin and Rothschild 2002; Shankland 2020), practices and power structures, not just a backdrop for human activity. This shifts architectural discourse from purely formal concerns like shape, form, style to how space is lived, organized and inhabited (Archer, 2005). Archer (2005) engaged with the production of space in an architectural context where beliefs, norms, social practices and architecture intersect.

The discourse of space then expands into “how is it lived and culturally produced?” where the main concern is on contemporary issues of spatial culture, everyday life, meaning and experience in architecture (Peponis, 2024; Young, 2023). The focus shifts on spatial culture emphasizes how inhabitants, users, everyday practices bring life into architectural space. Space become a place to act and socially constructed and constitutive (Schmader and Graham 2015). Further theoretical and practical inquiries into the production of space become increasingly significant when they recognize that space is shaped not only by form and function, but also by user experience, cultural values, and embedded meanings. The interactions between people, things, products, and space are affected by human cognition and social action processed (Anschuetz et al., 2001; Gillings et al., 2020; Larasati et al., 2022). Consequently, the nature of spatial problems is often articulated through questions such as: Where do social actors carry out their activities? How are these actions performed and structured? And when do they take place? These questions are particularly relevant in craft-making spaces, where spatial organization is closely tied to technological processes and ethnological modes of production.

Craft-making is deeply rooted in local material practices which refer to the ways in which communities use, process, and transform materials that are sourced from their immediate environment, based on locally inherited knowledge, skills, cultural values, and traditions (Sennett, 2009). These practices are not only technical but also social, cultural and serves as an activity where individuals as cultural beings can live, think, and emotionally respond to a place in community life. It is also processing of thoughts and feelings regarding everyday life events can occur (Adamson, 2018; Costin, 2001; Palmsköld and Torell, 2020). The study of craft-making has focused on products and craftsmanship to meet consumption and production needs based on several mechanisms that construct the making process (Asante et al., 2015; Bamforth and Finlay, 2008). Archaeological evidence has helped us understand how ancient communities share various common technological traditions across regions (Simon and Burton, 1998; Kassab, 2021). However, the ways in which the craft-making space continually produced, reproduced, and collectively transformed over time remain underexplored. This request for a specific analytical approach to uncover spatial forms emerge within craft neighborhoods and how these spaces materialize through ongoing practices.

This research investigates the local material practices within craft-based neighborhoods to see how local craftspeople organize and utilize spaces throughout the stages of material transformation as a system. Although craft neighborhoods are formed naturally, sponta-

neously, locally and come from community-based traditions (Papanek, 1995), the study in this article seeks to examine the values of contextual architecture, particularly in terms of spatial concepts linked with materials and technology in the way how these spatial practices reflect, sustain, and shape system of production and their cultural identity. The case of *gerabah* (indigenous Javanese pottery) is used to observe how spatial organization and production stages are consciously or intuitively arranged by local communities as a form of social practice that constructs identity within craft neighborhoods.

This article introduces a system as a collective mode of working and living within a community, in which production processes, knowledge, tools, spaces, and responsibilities are continuously negotiated, shared, and sustained among its members. It is not merely a group of individuals working in proximity, but a social and spatial organization where collaboration, mutual dependence, inherited skills, and cultural values come together to continuously shape both the craft and the environment in which it exists. The findings of this study are expected to enrich theoretical understanding of local material practices as a collective system and broaden the notion of contextuality in relation to material process and spatial production. Moreover, this knowledge has the potential to inform the development of design frameworks for a neighborhood based on community-driven collective spatial and production systems.

The Production of Space in Craft Neighborhood

Humans continually shape and produce their physical space as an adaptation to their surrounding environment. Physical space is not simply as background for passive actions, rather it exists because of social action and in turns structures social relations (Robin and Rothschild, 2002). At the same time, the presence of physical space can also limit certain human behaviors or even trigger other forms of operations. Physical space has several structures and devices that hold social meaning and function as an active agents in the realization of various social actions (Bourdieu, 1989; 2018). Following those arguments, physical space may be understood as a living canvas of the presence of various operations and actions. Space becomes a container for human social action that exists independently, which begins to be produced before the actual event and is a combined effect of the processes carried out by humans and the environment.

The interrelationship between physical space and social actions in people's everyday lives generates what Lefebvre (1991) calls social space. Social space could be produced through socio-historical relations while questioning how space is produced concretely (Morida Siagian, 2016). Related to this thought, Lefebvre places spatial practice as the lived dimensions of social practice. Spatial practice is not always associated with physical spaces where social practice takes place but also the realm in which appropriation occurs. Appropriation can be in the form of physical and concrete actions that provide other actions or through the construction of knowledge that allows the practice of interpreting space. In this way, human experience becomes central to how space is understood, inhabited and produced.

The human experience is shaped by both material and non-material things that transformed into products. Transformation refers to internal change that revealing and reconstituting an object's essence. Leyton (1992) argues that the trajectory of change can also be described as a discontinuity series consisting of a series of actions that can be classified.

From these perspectives leads to an assumption that space, as a form of 'contextuality' of the world, has been altered, reproduced, or modified from its original form due to ongoing human action. Therefore, studying the trajectories of space transformation within material practice, from past social action to the present, becomes essential as another form of contextuality in craft neighborhoods.

In understanding how communities in craft neighborhoods produce and transform their space, it is necessary to move beyond viewing space solely as site for production. The search for space identity should study the history of space and its representation (Lefebvre, 1991). Such investigations must be situated between various spatial practices of any systems involved to uncover other social processes and arrangements of program embedded within them. Yet, spatial studies often begin with the study of measurable material, spatial dimensions and physical remains (Delle, 1998; Parcak, 2019; Raja, 2021). The spatial dimension is frequently defined as part of an abstract system that organizes cultural activities within a time-space framework (Kidder, 1961).

The craft-making space in a craft neighborhood is continuously reproduced, experienced and negotiated beyond its function as a site for material production. How the space is produced shows a form of activity where humans as cultural beings can live, where the processing of thoughts and feelings regarding everyday life and political events can occur (Palmsköld and Torell, 2020; Atmodiwirjo and Yatmo, 2019; Certeau et al., 2000). 'Making' as an action and attitude must be studied indirectly by analyzing space and objects related to production activities. Since human behavior is difficult to fully access through interviews or observation, spatial interpretation of local material space must attend not only to spatial origins but also to interconnection, distortions, displacements, reciprocal interactions, and their relation to social-spatial practices or certain modes of production embedded with them.

Collective Action in Local Material Practice

Local material practice introduces materials not merely as physical elements that shapes an architectural space, but as process of making of local materials is understood as collective action in producing everyday spatial environments. The perspective stems from an intrinsic understanding of materiality that cannot be detached from architectural practice about several other aspects of an architectural substance (Schröpfer and Carpenter 2011). Kolarevic (2010) similarly emphasizes that architecture as a material practice implies that making, the close engagement with the material which is intrinsic to a design process. The involvement of materials with tools and production methods works together as a system. More broadly, material practice becomes part of a collective system that intertwined with everyday practices in forming the lived space of a particular local community.

The discussion of material practice as a system in architecture is essential to move beyond current understandings that reduce it to purely technical or construction-related issue. Most of current discourse on material practice is preoccupied with form making (Ingold, 2013). The material has yet to be acknowledged as the core of element in spatial production. Instead, it is largely framed as a part of the system-forming space which concerns of form, structure, and geometry (Bell and Rand, 2006). Yet, architecture as a material practice originates from fundamental human physical needs in responding to environmental condi-

tions through the processing of materials and systems that have been available in nature. (Minke, 2013; Semper, 1989; Herrmann, 1984).

Architectural practice offers various ways of perceiving and shaping the built environment through structured design between forms and materials (Bell and Rand, 2006; Coleman, 2020; Golden, 2018). Attfield (2000) also mentioned that the material culture offers an alternatives approach for understanding design, both products and space. In architectural space-making, this often corresponds with the material's honesty or components that form the atmosphere of the space (Zumthor, 2006). Positioning material practice in the discourse on the formation of architectural space also means appreciating sensory qualities, technical potential, materiality, and other attributes brought by material systems.

The understanding on material practice expands into form (Atmodiwirjo and Yatmo, 2020) of architectural grounded in context which an architectural work is presented, not limited to the physical existence of material in various forms and types. Yet, it is also closely related to various techniques and methods that accompany the existence of materials that are closely related to the ecological context and the socio-cultural context of everyday society. This opinion aligns with Sennett's (2008) notion of craftsmanship as a form of 'act of making,' where design is a negotiation among multiple parameters. In this sense, 'making' is not an isolate act, but a collective and situated process that formed through interaction between material, environment, skill, and community.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, non-participatory research approach using case studies to investigate how local material practice of '*gerabah*,' as a Javanese indigenous pottery shape and organize spatial production in craft neighborhoods. Developed in many different forms, the making of *gerabah* represents a material practice on various scales and constitutes an important part of architectural production activities. The focus is on understanding how space is socially and materially produced through everyday craft-making activities, aligning with the research objective of revealing material practices as a collective spatial system. This was a non-participatory observation, meaning the researcher did not take part in the making process, but carefully observed how craftsmen moved through their workspace, how tools and materials were arranged, and how household and production spaces overlapped.

The fieldwork was conducted over one month in several production sites within Kasongan Village, Yogyakarta, a renowned craft settlement where pottery-making has been practiced and passed down through generations. Kasongan was deliberately chosen because of its strong spatial connection to craft-making, the arrangement of workshops within homes, the shared use of communal kilns, clay processing areas near rice fields, and display spaces that merge seamlessly with domestic life. These characteristics offered a rich environment to observe how space, materials, and community coexist and evolve together.

The data were gathered by observing the practices of making *gerabah* as a whole process from material preparation to finalization. Photographs were taken to obtain information on each of the processes. To complement these observations, semi-structured interviews were

conducted with 15 participants, consisting of master craftsmen, kiln operators, younger artisans, local leaders, and traders. Participants were selected based on their experience (a minimum of five years in *gerabah* production) and their active involvement in one or more stages of the craft-making process. Each interview focusing on several themes: how workspaces are organized, how decisions about material placement are made, how knowledge and skills are inherited, how production is shared among family or neighbors, and how space relates to their identity, memory, and tradition.

The data analysis involved three main steps. First, photographs, sketches, and field notes were synthesized into spatial diagrams to understand zoning, workflow, and the relationship between domestic and production spaces. Second, interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes such as material flow, collective labor, spatial adaptation, and cultural values embedded in making. Finally, these spatial and narrative findings were combined to answer the research questions: How is space produced alongside material practices? How does making become a collective spatial system? And how does this process contribute to cultural identity in craft neighborhoods? Through this narrative methodology, the study not only documents the physical processes of *gerabah* making but also reveals how space and material practices are continuously negotiated, shared, and lived then becoming part of a collective system that shapes the architectural identity of the community.

Spatial Reading of Local Material Practices

The following section presents a spatial reading of local material-making space based on multiple sources. In this study, spatial reading refers to the process of interpreting how space is produced, organized, and experienced through material practices and everyday human actions. It is not limited to observing physical forms or architectural layouts, but instead aims to understand the relationships between people, materials, tools, and the environment as they interact to shape space over time. In reading the spatial setting, multiple sources are utilized to understand how space is produced and organized through local material practices. This includes integrating contextual information derived from physical traces, documentary materials, and evidence of material culture.

The spatial reading of local material practices is conducted through three interrelated aspects that help reveal how space is produced and collectively organized. The first aspect is the micro–macro spatial setting, which examines space at both the small scale such as individual workstations and the larger scale of neighborhood organization, including the relationships between homes, workshops, communal kilns, and circulation routes within the village. The second aspect concerns the organization of actors, focusing on how craftsmen, family members, apprentices, kiln operators, and traders occupy and interact within space. This includes understanding how roles, responsibilities, hierarchies, and patterns of cooperation are spatially arranged and embedded in everyday activities. The third aspect is the material flow and layers of operation, which traces how materials move from one stage to another such as clay sourcing, preparation, forming, drying, firing, finishing and how each layer of operation requires specific spatial conditions and interactions. Through the integration of these three aspects, spatial reading enables a deeper understanding of local material practices as a collective spatial system rather than an individual or purely technical activity.

Macro-micro Setting

The production of local material-making space can be read through two interconnected spatial settings: micro and macro. The macro-setting represent the broader environment where communities interact and collaborate, while micro-setting captures the immediate sphere of individuals action (Schmader and Graham 2015). The anatomy of micro-setting can be defined as a 'making site,' where social action can be traced from individual activities that carry out a limited number of tasks with limited tools. The activities of the individuals present constitute and represent aspects of social reality that are essentially qualitative, fluid, and dynamic. In contrast, the macro setting situates material practice within the larger context of community life, encompassing economic and domestic activities that overlap with repetitive production routines.

In reading the craft-making space at both the macro or micro setting, direct correlation between spatial features and their role in shaping space are often difficult to delineate. This is because process of making crafts is inherently cyclical, involving repeated production activities that continually reconfigure the spatial environment. To fully comprehend this process, it is essential to trace how the craft-making space is re-produced from two kinds of aspects, 'material' and 'immaterial. Material aspects include the tangible elements such as objects, tools, and architectural features, while immaterial aspects refer to intangible dimensions such as time, rhythm, and bodily movement. These aspects are not static but act as dynamic parameters that evolve through practice. Among them, time plays critical role. Time is one of the immaterial aspects in both micro and macro settings that compose the space production rather than as a piece of a frozen situation. Rather than representing a fixed moment, time in spatial production functions as a continuous process shaped by human movement and embodied experience (Simonetti, 2013). Related to this perspective, time has a very dynamic power in producing space as an abstract space, not a formal space. Space is not seen as a static or formal construct but as an abstract, lived continuum that unfolds through temporal and material interactions.

Through spatial reading in a macro level, we can easily understand of how community interactions from the overall organization of the craft-making environment. In Kasongan Village, *gerabah* production areas are distributed across multiple, interrelated locations, forming a network of spaces defined by scale and function. The layout shows that the *gerabah-making* rooms were concentrated in more than one location. The production area is spread across several interconnected places, which can be divided into several types of production space based on different scales and programs.

The area in macro level can be categorized into several typologies: large-scale production centers dedicated solely to pottery-making, medium-scale houses that combine production and display functions and smaller household-based workshops or showrooms that support larger facilities. The smaller units operate as supporting nodes within a broader production system, which evolves over time to accommodate specific pottery demands. This dynamic system allows smaller production spaces to adapt their roles in response to the needs of larger ones. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 1, Production Center A functions as one of the village's main *gerabah* hubs, supported by nearby smaller workshops (Rooms 1, 2, and 3). Similarly, Centers 4, 5, and 6 operate as auxiliary systems for Production Center B. Within each of these workshops, at the micro scale, various craft activities occur and each representing an individual layer of action within the larger collective system of spatial production.

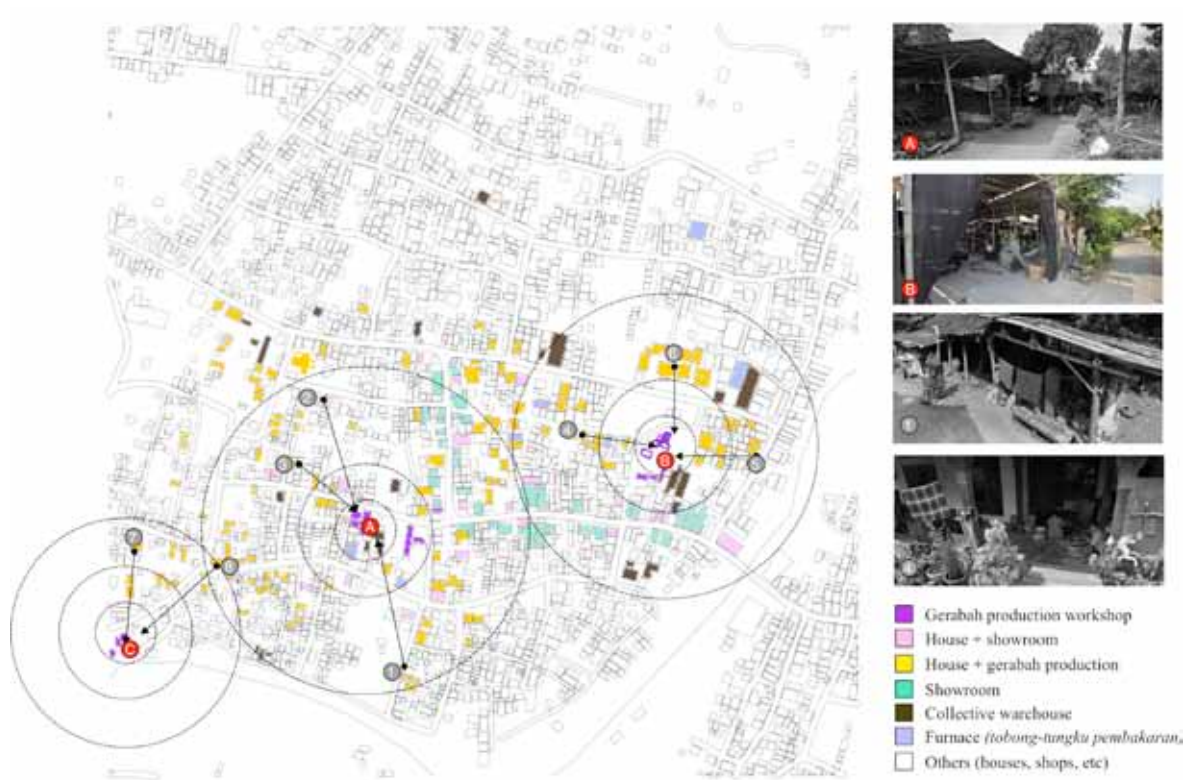


Figure 1 Macro setting of *gerabah* production space.

Spatial readings at micro settings in Kasongan Village shows a close relationships between the workshop production and domestic space. The relationship between the two practices highlights distinct settlement characteristics that emerges from the interaction between productive and domestic function. One visible thing is the difference in the arrangement of patterns and spatial characteristics formed from the relationship between material practices and other domestic practices. In most cases, domestic space occupies the inner layer of the dwelling, while the presence of a workshop positioned toward the outer layer. The external side of workshop not only connects the settlement's outdoor communal environment with the household's interior on the inner layer, but also transforms the production area into a potential site of social and economic interact. This spatial configuration allows *gerabah-making* to extend beyond domestic boundaries, creating opportunities for engagement with visitors and functioning as a form of cultural and economic attraction.

At the micro scale, spatial readings exposes dynamic the nature of spatial production identified through traces of activity and movement of both fixed and non-fixed elements involved in the *gerabah-making* process. The shape of physical space is a fixed element, meanwhile materials, tools, and those that tend to be easily moved function as non-fixed elements. The interesting thing is that the spatial dynamics evolve through collective presence and interaction of actors who performing their respective roles. For instance, in the micro setting of the *gerabah* production room, which is integrated with the house or domestic setting (figure 2). The manufacturing process is carried out by husband and wife who make *gerabah-making* activities part of their domestic activities. Both might divide tasks where the wife forms specific parts of the pottery while the husband assembles and finish-

es the pieces. The wife's role is to make certain parts of the *gerabah*, and the husband's role is to put certain parts together and complete the work. Changes in spatial form and movement of tools occur dynamically depending on the type of *gerabah* being worked on. This fluidity illustrates how domestic and productive life are intertwined, producing an adaptive spatial system sustained by everyday material practice.

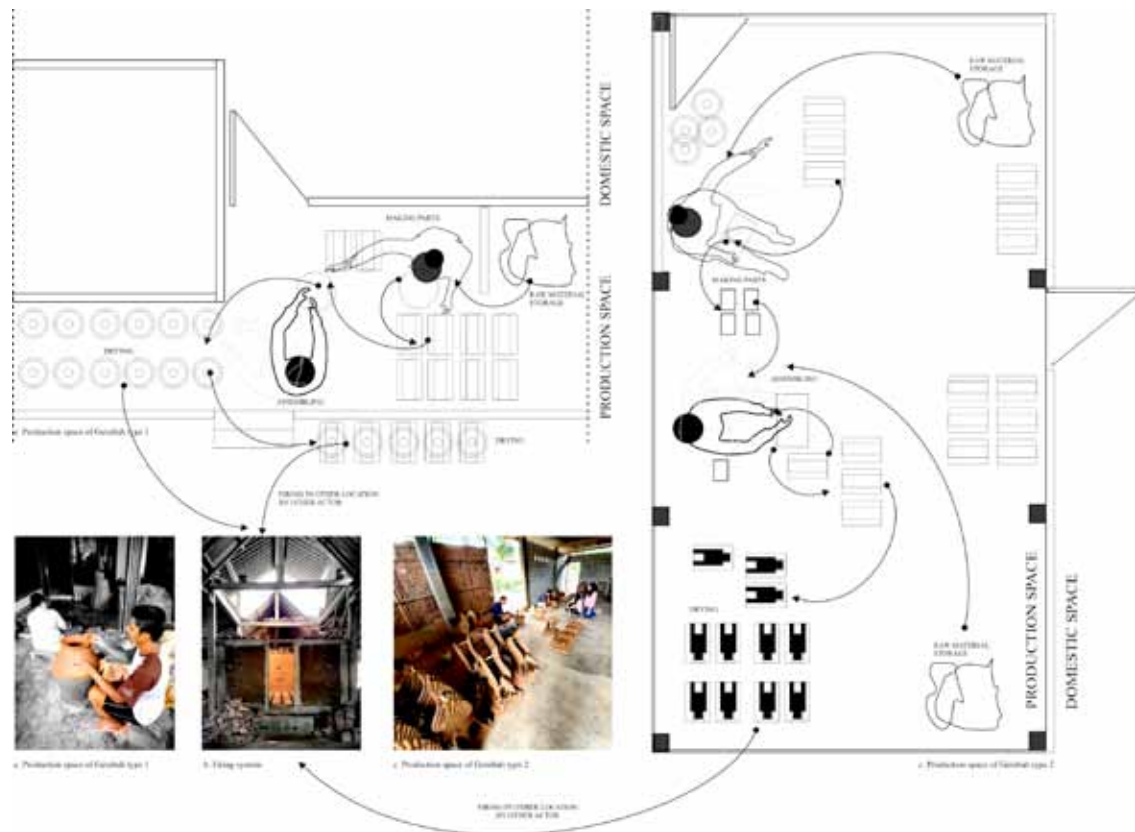


Figure 2 Micro setting of *gerabah* production space.

The analysis of the macro-micro spatial settings in Kasongan Village reveals that spatial production cannot only be understood in isolation within a single scale. Rather, it emerges from the continuous interaction of activities and overlap between the two settings. The reciprocal social relations operating between the micro (individual and domestic) and macro (communal and neighborhood) levels demonstrate how space is constantly reproduced through everyday practice. The ongoing production of space is reflected in the variations of spatial patterns that formed from the interplay relationship between material practices and other daily practices. These interconnections enable everyday environment to be produced as social spaces with a programmatic focus on action rather than form. Ultimately, spatial production in Kasongan is shaped by the coordination of actors, the circulation of materials, and the layered operations that together give meaning and identity to the community's built environment.

Organization of the Actors

The production of local material-making space in Kasongan Village involves a range of actors who play essential role in *gerabah-making* process. The primary actors are the makers who directly engaged in shaping and producing pottery. However, not all makers in the village are professionals artisan who rely in making *gerabah* as their main source of income.

Some are homemakers who integrate pottery-making as part of their daily routines. The coexistence of professional and non-professional makers in the *gerabah*-making process presents a dynamic and flexible organizational pattern within the village's production system.

The organization of makers in Kasongan village is inherently dynamic and changes according to the type of product being produced, the level of complexity, and the available workspace. A single actor may work on the same product in multiple locations or contribute to different products within the same area. For products with high complexity and composed of several parts, different actors collaborate on one particular part or stage of work based on their level of expertise. Beyond the core group of actors involved in this organizational system, various supporting actors outside the main making process, such as business owners, suppliers of soil materials, shippers of finished goods, and also influence the organization of production and contribute to shifts in how space is used.

The dynamic of maker organization can also be seen from the relationships among different scale of the production system, which are range from small to large production scales. These systems are spatially distributed yet interconnected, with smaller production units often functioning as support systems for larger ones. At times, several small-scale productions depend on each other to form a larger system. The system evolves to meet the needs of certain types of *gerabah* production. The programs contained in the small-scale production may sometimes change following the program's needs in the larger space. Such organizational change shows a system that works collectively based on each role played by each actor according to their respective skill levels.

Furthermore, this adaptive system affects how production spaces are occupied and utilized. The system organization of *gerabah* makers also shows a change in the occupancy of the making space, which is determined by the needs of different programs within the production space. The larger production space can accommodate multiple programs but is less likely to be modified. On the other hand, a smaller production space, which is also a support system for a larger production space, has a higher probability of program changes. They can be reorganized or repurposed to support different stages of production or to accommodate new types of products. This spatial flexibility highlights the capacity of smaller spaces to be continuously reproduced and reoccupied, revealing how the *gerabah*-making system operates as a living and evolving collective spatial network.

Material Flow

The flow of material in making *gerabah* in Kasongan village closely influence by the characteristic of raw materials and the tools used to produce the *gerabah*-making space. Clay is the main raw material used to make all types of *gerabah* products consisting of various types. Even though they are made of the same basic material, it is possible to change the occupancy of the space based on the type of *gerabah* being produced. This can happen because each type of *gerabah* has different techniques for making different clay characters, although the process is generally similar.

In general, the material flows corresponds to three main phases of the *gerabah* making, which is divided into raw material processing, *gerabah* formation processing, and firing. Each stages involves different group of actors who specialize in specific tasks, collectively transforming the clay's character. The process in the whole series of *gerabah* making pres-

ents how clay material character is changed. Two main types of clay are commonly used to make *gerabah* are red clay and black clay. The character of each type of clay determines the good quality of certain types of *gerabah*. To ensure consistent material quality, many makers now prefer purchasing pre-processed, ready-to-use clay from distributors rather than preparing it manually.

The material flow system begins with distributors or suppliers who process raw materials into workable materials. The process starts with clay extraction from surrounding areas known for their high-quality deposits. The raw clay is then sorted and separated from other elements that may reduce its quality. After that, the clay is further processed manually by stepping on it, using tools, or using a milling machine. The processed clay material is delivered to various workshops across the village, where it is shaped into different *gerabah* products using a range of techniques. Once formed, the pieces are sun-dried to reduce moisture and strengthen their structure before being fired in communal kilns to achieve a denser and more durable finish. The final products are subsequently distributed to different markets or display spaces by various actors within the production network.

The tools used in *gerabah* production also demonstrate flexibility and adaptability. Their roles often change depending on the production technique or product type. A primary example is the turntable, a central tool used in rotational forming for producing such as jugs, flower vases, cups, etc. However, turntables's use extend beyond rotational technique. It is often repurposed for other function, such as aiding in assembling multiple parts of a product by allowing smoother maneuverability during the process. This adaptability of tools reflects the fluid nature of spatial and material interactions in the production process.

Differences in the flow of material are also evident across scales of production. In a large-scale production workshop, the material flows tends to be more continuous and complete from raw materials to final firing stage. Conversely, in small-scale production workshop, typically handle only specific stages, such as shaping, while relying on communal facilities for material preparation and firing. In some small-scale productions, spatial limitations even cause the material flow to shift midway through production, requiring unfinished pieces to be transported elsewhere for subsequent stages. This variability illustrates how production scale, spatial capacity, and material logistics together shape the dynamic system of *gerabah*-making in Kasongan Village.

Layer of Operation

In general, the process of making *gerabah* in Kasongan village consists of three main stages: preparation, formation, and finalization. The preparation stage involves preparing the clay, kneading, moistening and removing any remaining impurities to obtain high-quality material suitable for further use. The formation stage focuses on the process of transforming the clay into specific shape using various tools and techniques such as modeling and hand-building, which involve adding and subtracting clay to achieve the desired form of *gerabah*. The finalization stage includes shape trimming, firing process, and quality control process to ensure the durability and consistency of *gerabah* finished products before distribution to various places.

Each stage of making *gerabah* comprises several layers of operations, all critical in shaping the material. Each operation may be carried out by the same craftsman or divided among different actor depending on the product type and production scale. During preparation,

essential task of operations include grinding and depositing the soil. The collected clay material is generally moistened with water until distributed, left to rest for several days. After that, the clay is milled repeatedly either manually or mechanically until it reaches the right texture and stickiness.. The best results are generally produced using manual milling, although a machine allows the fastest results. Typically, the same actors who collect the raw material also handle this stage before distributing the processed clay to other makers across the village.

The series of operations in the formation process is the core phase in *gerabah-making*. Its success relies heavily on the tacit knowledge and skill of each actor/maker, who uses both bodily gestures and tools to create various forms of *gerabah*. The operation is carried out using certain tools and techniques according to the type of *gerabah* to be made. Common techniques include molding, typically used for base structure, and hand building, applied to join parts or add decorative details .What makes this formation process particularly dynamic is the involvement of different actors in the entire series of operations. While most makers can perform basic molding operation on certain types of *gerabah* due its simplicity and repetitive use of tools, more intricate tasks require specialized skills, such as combining parts between parts on certain types of *gerabah* or the shape refinement stage. For example, the technique used in the refinement operation often involve sprinkling water or applying a damp cloth to smooth the surface of the clay, an operation that only experienced artisans can execute effectively. This interdependence creates a form of collective craftsmanship, where collaboration adapts fluidly according to production needs.

The firing stage is the final and most crucial process in *gerabah* production, where the clay is exposed to high temperatures to achieve structural stability and durability. Firing transforms the clay's materiality, preventing it from reverting to its original malleable state. This process is essential to ensure that the shape of the *gerabah* will not change back to the basic character of the clay by changing its materiality. This stage demands specific expertise, as makers must carefully control the temperature and duration to match the clay's curing properties. Skilled kiln operators are responsible for monitoring the firing process to ensure that each piece achieves the desired strength and finish. Through these cumulative and interdependent operations – each involving material transformation, technical precision, and collaborative labor – the *gerabah-making* process in Kasongan exemplifies how local material practices form a dynamic and collective system of spatial and cultural production.

Above cumulative and interdependent operations which involving material transformation, technical precision, and collaborative labor in the *gerabah-making* process illustrates how local material practices operate as a collective spatial system. The sequence of tasks, movement of materials, and interaction among actors together produce not only the physical artifact but also the spatial structure that supports it. Workspaces, domestic areas, and communal firing grounds are continuously reorganized as materials flow through different stages, reflecting a dynamic form of spatial production where social relationships, technical knowledge, and material conditions are inseparably intertwined.

Result: Local Material Practices as a Collective System

The case study presented in this article shows the complete process of making *gerabah*, where each stage is carried out in manual skills, embodied (verbal and non-verbal) knowledge, and particular modes of work coordination. The various operations at each stage can occur parallel or sequentially, functioning as an integrated system of production. This sys-

tem operates effectively in Kasongan village because the process of making *gerabah* often involves multiple actors working at different location and times. Some operations, especially during forming stage, can be performed simultaneously in separate spaces, while other operations require the collective participation of specific actors within shared locations. Each operation is interdependent, forming a continuous network of production activities that collectively sustain the spatial and social system of *gerabah*-making (figure 3).

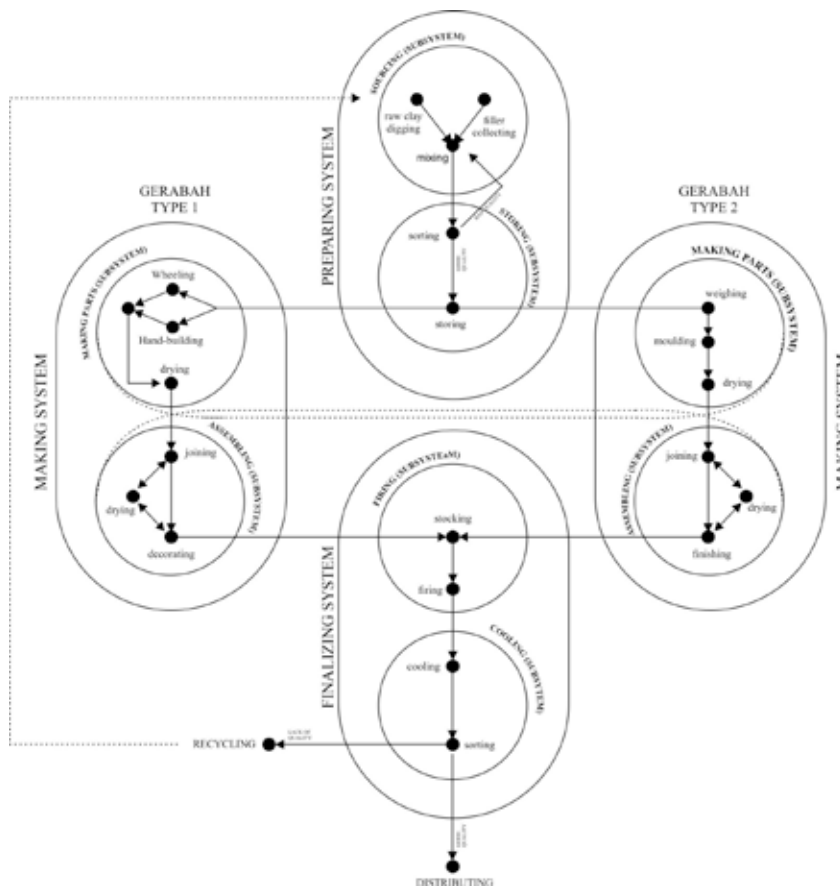


Figure 3 Local material practice as a collective system.

This study identifies both material and immaterial traces that reflect evolving social and spatial interactions in producing *gerabah*-making spaces. For instance, within the formation space, spatial changes occur spontaneously as a result of daily activities. Many production spaces in Kasongan village are not exclusively dedicated to craft-making. Instead, portions of domestic spaces such as the front porches of houses are often adapted for *gerabah* production. The openness of these material practice allows flexible social interactions among makers and between makers, even visitors. Such interactions transform the production space into a social and cultural setting, expanding its function beyond craft-making to include observation, knowledge exchange, and economic engagement. Consequently, these interactions redefine the spatial scale and character of the *gerabah*-making environment as a site of living knowledge production.

The spatial reading in this case study further demonstrate that space not a fixed entity but a reproducible process which continuously reshaped through the dynamic relation-

ships between actors, materials, and operations. The interplay between actors, materials, and operations reveals the collective nature of material practice and its role in forming an interconnected spatial system. Some actors can shift roles according to their skills and the demand of specific operations with certain tools, highlighting a flexible and adaptive organization based on mutual dependence.. This collective system not only reflects the practical coordination required for production but also embodies the social and cultural dimensions of architectural space as a shared and evolving construct.

The findings also show that spatial systems in Kasongan are co-produced through social interaction, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas among community members in craft neighborhoods. In this context, collectivity is understood as the sharing of roles, knowledge and labor to form an identity that may not be visible externally but is deeply rooted within the community of Kasongan village. The success of this collective system relies on a balance of trust, communication, and shared responsibility, although it remains sensitive to internal social and psychological dynamics. Nonetheless, this system strengthens the sense of communal space through conscious and unconscious acts of spatial negotiation and cooperation. Over time, it sustains and redefines contextual values which not merely as expressions of environmental harmony, but as evolving agreements and shared practices that form part of Kasongan's living cultural identity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that understanding the space production in local material practice as a collective system offers valuable insights into how traditional craft environments, such as those in Kasongan Village, integrate cultural meaning, social organization, and spatial form. The findings demonstrate that the *gerabah-making* process operates not merely as a series of technical activities but as a dynamic socio-material system in which actors, materials, and operations continuously interact. This dynamic relationship reinforces the idea that space is not a static container for activity but a living construct that shaped and reshaped through repeated cycles of making, cooperation, and adaptation. By framing *gerabah-making* as both a material and social process, the study shows how craft production can foster collective knowledge within communities and strengthen the relationship between local industries and the lived spaces of craft neighborhoods.

Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the production of space, this research extends the idea beyond socio-historical processes to include socio-material practices, involves the tangible, bodily, and environmental engagements that occur within the act of making. Similarly, following Ingold's (2013) perspective of making as dwelling, the *gerabah-making* environment embodies a reciprocal relationship between people, materials, and place, where space emerges as a record of lived experience rather than a predetermined design. Appropriation through continuous physical and social actions enables spatial interpretation that transcends fixed functions, revealing space as fluid, temporal, and performative.

Ultimately, the collective system observed in Kasongan exemplifies a form of contextual architecture which grounded in local materiality, shared knowledge, and communal identity. It underscores that spatial production in craft neighborhoods is not only about building physical environments but also about sustaining social cohesion and cultural continuity through everyday material practices. Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore

how other community groups across different contexts produce and reinterpret their everyday spaces through distinct systems of local material practice. Comparative studies could deepen our understanding of how spatial production evolves across diverse cultural settings, contributing to broader architectural and anthropological discourse on how space, material, and society are co-produced as part of living traditions.

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Journal Policies

Journal Policies

About JUCR

The Journal of Urban Culture Research is an international, online, double-blind, peer-reviewed journal published biannually in June & December by the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts of Thailand's Chulalongkorn University in conjunction with the Urban Research Plaza of Osaka City University, Japan. JUCR offers its readers two categories of content. One is a window into the latest international conferences and reviews of related sources – books etc. along with guest articles, special features and case studies. Secondly, its main core is a range of peer-reviewed articles from researchers in the international community. No fees are charged.

The Aims of JUCR

This journal on urban culture aims at establishing a broad interdisciplinary platform for studies of cultural creativity and the arts that brings together researchers and cultural practitioners to identify and share innovative and creative experiences in establishing sustainable and vibrant, livable communities while fostering cultural continuity. The journal embraces broad cultural discussions regarding communities of any size as it recognizes the urban community's rural roots. JUCR encourages researchers and the full range of artists in visual art, design, music, the creative arts, performance studies, dance, cultural studies, ethnomusicology, and related disciplines such as creative arts therapies and urban planning. Articles related to either the academic or wide vernacular interpretation of urban culture and the arts as a tool promoting community and individual well-being, health, and diversity are welcome.

JUCR has the objective of stimulating research on both the theory and practice of fine and applied arts in response to social challenges and environmental issues as well as calling for solutions across the creative realms. Moreover, JUCR supports advocacy processes, improvements in practices, and encourages supportive public policy-making related to cultural resources. JUCR intends to offer readers relevant theoretical discussions and act as a catalyst for expanding the knowledge-base of creative expression related to urban culture.

Review Process

1. JUCR promotes and encourages the exchange of knowledge in the field of fine and applied arts among scholars worldwide. Contributions may be research articles, reports of empirical studies, reviews of films, concerts, dances, and art exhibitions. Academic papers and book reviews are also acceptable. Articles are typically only considered for publication in JUCR with the mutual understanding that they have not been published in English elsewhere and are not currently under consideration by any other English language journal(s). Occasionally, noteworthy articles worthy of a broader audience that JUCR provides, will be reprinted. Main articles are assessed and peer reviewed by specialists in their relevant fields. Furthermore to be accepted for publication, they must also receive the approval of the editorial board.

2. To further encourage and be supportive of the large diverse pool of authors whose English is their second language, JUCR employs a 3-stage review process. The first is a double-

blind review comprised of 2-3 international reviewers experienced with non-native English writers. This is then followed by a non-blind review. Thirdly, a participative peer review will, if needed, be conducted to support the selection process.

3. All articles published in the journal will have been fully peer-reviewed by two, and in some cases, three reviewers. Submissions that are out of the scope of the journal or are of an unacceptably low standard of presentation will not be reviewed. Submitted articles will generally be reviewed by two experts with the aim of reaching an initial decision within a two-month time frame.

4. The reviewers are identified by their solid record of publication as recommended by members of the editorial board. This is to assure the contributors of fair treatment. Nominations of potential reviewers will also be considered. Reviewers determine the quality, coherence, and relevancy of the submissions for the Editorial Board who makes a decision based on its merits. High relevancy submissions may be given greater prominence in the journal. The submissions will be categorized as follows:

- Accepted for publication as is.
- Accepted for publication with minor changes, no additional reviews necessary.
- Potentially acceptable for publication after substantial revision and additional reviews.
- Article is rejected.
- A notice of acceptance will be sent to submitting authors in a timely manner.

5. In cases where there is disagreement between the authors and reviewers, advice will be sought from the Editorial Board. It is the policy of the JUCR to allow a maximum of three revisions of any one manuscript. In all cases, the ultimate decision lies with the Editor-in-Chief after a full board consultation.

6. JUCR's referee policy treats the contents of articles under review as privileged information and will not be disclosed to others before publication. It is expected that no one with access to articles under review will make any inappropriate use of its contents.

7. The comments of the anonymous reviewers will be forwarded to authors upon request and automatically for articles needing revision so that it can serve as a guide. Note that revisions must be completed and resubmitted within the time frame specified. Late revised works may be rejected.

8. In general, material, which has been previously copyrighted, published, or accepted for publication elsewhere will not be considered for publication in the main section of JUCR.

9. The review process shall ensure that all authors have an equal opportunity for publication. The acceptance and scheduling of submissions for publication in the journal shall not be impeded by additional criteria or amendments to the procedures beyond those listed above.

10. The views expressed in articles published are the sole responsibility of the authors and not necessarily shared by the JUCR editors or Chulalongkorn University.

Submission Requirements

- Worthy contributions in the urban culture arena are welcome from researchers and practitioners at all stages in their careers. A suggested theme is announced prior to each issue.
- Manuscripts should generally not exceed 7,000 words including the abstract and references. Tables, figures, and illustrative material are accepted only when necessary for support.
- Manuscripts need to use our template for submission. Please download from our website's submission guidelines page. Details are described in the top half of the first page with sample text following. Documents not using the template will be returned for reformatting.
- All manuscripts are required to include a title, abstract, keywords, author's byline information, an introduction and conclusion section along with a Chicago formatted reference list. Manuscripts with existing footnotes and in-text references may retain them as a resource for readers, but are not required. Footnotes are to be relocated as non-standardized endnotes listed before references.
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- Authors authorize the JUCR to publish their materials both in print and online while retaining their full individual copyright. The copyright of JUCR volumes is retained by Chulalongkorn University.
- Authors should strive for maximum clarity of expression. This point cannot be overstated. Additionally, authors need to bear in mind that the purpose of publication is the disclosure and discussion of artistic knowledge and innovations that expands the realm of human creativity and experience.

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Criteria and Responsibilities for Editorial Board Membership

Overview

The Editorial Board is comprised of members who have significant expertise and experience in their respective fields. Editorial Board Members are appointed by the Executive Director with the approval of at least 60% of the Editors and Editorial Board.

Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria for appointment shall include:

- Demonstrated scholarly expertise and ethical leadership in an area not over represented on the existing Editorial Board.
- Published three or more papers in scholarly publications.
- Demonstrated excellence in the review process, based on independent evaluations of the Editors and Associates.
- Stated commitment to contribute to issues affecting the management of JUCR.

Responsibilities

Members of the Editorial Board are directly accountable to the Managing Editor. Responsibilities include but are not limited to:

- Provide input on editorial needs and review manuscripts as requested.
- Complete assigned reviews in a timely fashion. Offer mutually respectful and constructive review of manuscripts to assist in providing the highest quality of papers.
- Maintain confidentiality and objectivity with regard to manuscripts and the JUCR review process.
- Participate in the evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of JUCR so as to help sustain the highest level of excellence.
- Once appointed to the Editorial Board, members are encouraged to submit at least one paper during their tenure.

Nomination Process

Nominations are submitted in writing (via email or post) and addressed to the Editor in Chief or any member of the Editorial staff. Candidates/applicants must submit a CV including a statement addressing her/his interests and suitability for Board membership. JUCR assumes the general readership would be able to identify the candidate by her/his reputation for scholarship in an established line of inquiry.

When a candidate is approved by majority vote of the current JUCR board members, she/he will be invited to serve by the Editor in Chief for a specified term of three years. The Dean of Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts in turn will finalize the appointment. Continued membership of the Editorial Board will be reviewed every three years by a member of the Editorial Board with a decision about candidates submitted annually. The number of Editorial Board members will not exceed 20 unless otherwise agreed upon.



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JUCR encourages researchers and the full range of artists in visual arts, creative arts, music, dance, theater together with those in urban studies and planning to seek cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural practices.

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