

## **Treechada Chotiratanapinun**

### **Bamboo for Life: An Exploration of Bamboo Craft Practices in Thailand**

Considered one of Thailand's most socioeconomically important species, bamboo is frequently found in open land throughout the country. They are incredibly fast growing and able to rapidly invade into any kind of land, including degraded areas. Being multipurpose species for a variety of uses such as food, household construction, craft making, paper pulping and more, the significant species of bamboo in Thailand can be divided into 3 groups according to their utilisation. (Pattanavibool 1998) Since Thais use bamboo shoots for food, the first group comprises of bamboos for shoot production, which are *Dendrocalamus asper* (Pai Tong), *Dendrocalamus brandisii* (Pai Bongyai), *Dendrocalamus strictus* (Pai Sangdoi), *Bambusa blumeana* (Pai Seesuk), *Thyrsostachys siamensis* (Pai Ruak), *Thyrsostachys oliverii* (Pai Ruakdum) and *Gigantochloa albociliata* (Pai Rai). Bamboo shoots are widely used in Thai cuisines, especially in typical dishes like green curry, red curry and spicy bamboo shoot salad, which is well-known northeastern food. The bamboo tube itself can be applied as cooking utensil too. Khao lam, for instance, is street food made out of a mixture of sticky rice, sugar, coconut cream and black beans, placed in bamboo tube and roasted.

With a purpose for construction, such as supporting poles and alike, the second group includes bamboos for stem production, which are *Bambusa bambos* (Pai Pha), *Bambusa blumeana*, *Bambusa nana* (Pai Liang), *Dendrocalamus asper*, *Dendrocalamus strictus*, *Dendrocalamus membranaceus* (Pai Sangnuan), *Thyrsostachys oliverii* (Pai ruak dam) and *Gigantochloa hasskarliana* (Pai Phaak). Bamboo houses can usually be found in the countryside, typically in the north of Thailand. In addition, looking particularly at stem production for basketry and handicrafts, the third group is consisted of *Bambusa blumeana* (Pai Seesuk), *Bambusa nana* (Pai Liang), *Thyrsostachys siamensis* (Pai Ruak), *Thyrsostachys oliverii* (Pai ruak dam), *Gigantochloa hasskarliana* (Pai Phaak) and *Cephalostachyum virgatum* (Pai Hiae). Closely knitted to the concept of life, since the ancient time, bamboo has long been extensively utilised into an array of utility artefacts to put to use from birth to death, from bamboo cradle to bamboo coffin. Although Thailand has become industrialised since the mid 1980s, at present bamboo is still considered a matchless material for the creative industries, which is often merged with the local wisdom and the dexterity of artisans. *Bambusa blumeana* (Pai Seesuk) has always been the exceptional choice for crafts, especially wickerwork and furniture making.

The objective of this writing is to look at the question of the sustainability of bamboo craft practices in Thailand, focusing on three different aspects of crafts production, promotion and infrastructure. Through three case studies, the paper explores the critical role of bamboo crafts in relation to culture, society, economy and politics. With an emphasis on projects that give the community additional income through bamboo craft activities, the paper also examines how such practices associate with the concepts of Buddhist Economics and Creative Economy.

#### **Phanatnikhom Craftspeople and the Buddhist Economics**

Phanatnikhom is a district in Chonburi province, located approximately one hundred kilometres east of Bangkok. Comprised by two telling words, "Phanat" meaning "forest" and "Nikhom" meaning "town", Phanatnikhom was evidently a tranquil town full of green surroundings. The name itself testifies to the fact that the locals lived there with nature. On the area of nearly three square kilometres, today it is a municipal district with the population of twelve thousand people. In 2008, it was awarded Thailand's Most Pleasant Town by the Local Development Institute, using the Composite Healthy City Index based

on multiple indicators including safety, cleanliness, quality of life, good governance and cultural identity. The general well-being of the individuals within their communities is outstanding while the social process represents the social context in which the people's cheerful interactions take place. One exemplary practice is their significant gathering held annually in the sixth month of the Thai lunar calendar. Having been handed down for generations, for just about a century, to embrace the traditions of Thai, Laotian and Chinese, it basically is a merit making ritual after rice harvest called Boon Klang Ban and Phanatnikhom Basketwork Festival.

The event brings together two different concepts in harmony, one is Buddhism and another is the celebration of their inherited local wisdom of bamboo wickerwork. Encouraging the townspeople to unite to perform meritorious deeds with each other, the event normally begins with merit-making rituals, such as putting food offerings in Buddhist monks' alms bowls and paying homage to ancestors, and is then followed by a parade, offering the share of meals, folk entertainments and a demonstration of local bamboo wickerwork. Since there are often a small number of tourists in town seeking for cultural sightseeing, the rally unquestioningly is a powerful way to promote their renowned community products. The parade does not only display common basketry, but also large, unusual bamboo woven sculptures especially made for the event. They keep changing the highlight pieces each year so that it is inspirational, stimulating and best for recreation for both the locals and visitors.



Figure 1: Buddhist monks during the merit making rituals, accommodated in a room decorated with various types of wickerwork



Figure 2: Part of the wickerwork parade by community members who have Chinese ancestors, with a bamboo woven sculpture in dragon shape as a highlight piece

As a merit-making celebration after rice harvest and a festival showcasing proudly-presented local products that deliver delight and cheerfulness to the audience, in my opinion, Boon Klang Ban and Phanatnikhom Basketwork Festival in fact subtly shows the impression of Buddhist economics. From the point of view of Buddhist economics, 'work and leisure are complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure.' (Schumacher 1989) As it happens, both the practices of rice growing and bamboo wickerwork are very much about how to attain given ends with the minimum means. Considering a contrast from the economics of modern materialism, 'the Buddhist sees the essence of civilisation not in a multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character. Character, at the same time, is formed primarily by a man's work. And work, properly conducted in conditions of human dignity and freedom, blesses those who do it and equally their products.' (Schumacher 1989) In other words, small means can lead to extraordinarily satisfactory results. The core of Buddhist economics, therefore, is simplicity.

Self proclaimed as the world's biggest bamboo weaving community in which fine techniques have been passed on for generations, Phanatnikhom is known for its distinctive and intricate bamboo basketware. In the past, the wickerwork was limited to household use. At the time, common artefacts made out of bamboo are baskets and cowls, cone-shaped cover made of bamboo for keeping food away from flies. But later, with unique wickerwork techniques, for example, slitting bamboo into very tiny pin-like shapes before weaving, the products were gradually developed to be more elaborate and marketable. In 1978, Phanatnikhom Arts and Crafts Skills Development Project was set up by the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (SUPPORT Foundation) to revitalise the indigenous craft skills by providing bamboo wickerwork training to the interested individuals. It later functions as a cooperative enterprise in order to produce and market their products.

At present, there are nearly fifty skillful craftspeople and each earns good supplementary income, close to 5,000 Baht a month, assisting them to feed their families. The product prices vary, depending on the design and the level of delicacy. Emphasising that their wicker goods must be both beautiful and applicable, each member in the community occupies different skills. Their products are available at the Promotion Centre for Bamboo Basketry Skills as well as for export to Japan and Hong Kong. Regularly receiving orders from Japan for years, the development of their designs is distinct as they progressively learn about upcoming design trend from their customers. Bamboo wickerwork is notably embodied as part of the community.

Even though bamboo deforestation is almost impossible, bamboo agriculture in Phanatnikhom has increasingly been threatened by urbanisation, leading to the need to import bamboo from Chanthaburi province, which is nearby, instead. Furthermore, despite the fact that Phanatnikhom is a large wickerwork community, I have come to realise that today it appears to share the same problem as other craft communities in Thailand. That is, due to the expansion of the neighbouring industrial estate, young people turning away from wickerwork, which they regard as too difficult and boring. It is evident that the community's older members keep working on their handicraft while their physical strength still allows them to do so. But deep inside, their fear grows the future of their local wisdom is ill-fated by the young generation's attitude. In that case, discontinued wickerwork items will only function as a reminder of the elderly craftspeople's endurance.

## **SUPPORT Foundation and OTOP Program, the Political Infrastructure Influencing the Development of Bamboo Crafts**

Bamboo wickerwork products have long been used in almost every aspect of daily life in Thailand and at present are widely merchandised as both local goods and souvenirs for tourists. The attraction seems to be its simplicity, created through the use of strength and resilience of cut and dried bamboo that are woven into forms that are light yet strong. However, the hidden beauty is indeed the fact that most of bamboo goods available in markets are the means for poverty alleviation, in order to contribute to the sustainable livelihood of the grass-root citizen. This section aims to explore the political infrastructure of Thailand's rural economic development of over the last few decades, including the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (SUPPORT Foundation) and One Tambon One Product Program (OTOP).

Because farming activities alone often did not generate sufficient income to feed families, the Foundation for the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (SUPPORT Foundation) was established in 1976 by Her Majesty Queen Sirikit to offer alternative employment opportunities to supplement the basic income of rural farming communities throughout the country. Based on the rationale that each of the regions is source of a vast variety of indigenous raw materials and cottage industries, the foundation provides vocational training for residents of agrarian communities dotted around Thailand, in order to enables them to become skilled artisans. At the beginning, the main training centre was set up at Chitralada Palace, the royal residence in Bangkok, and later other temporary training centres were launched in the countryside.

In relation to another core objective of the Foundation which is to conserve the folk Thai craft from extinction as well as to revive them to become well known again for later generations, Bangsai Arts and Crafts Training Centre was founded in 1981 as the biggest training hub in Thailand, offering more than 30 free-of-charge workshop training courses. Bamboo wickerwork is one of the foundation's key training divisions, providing training of both basic basketwork as well as fine basketry with specific weaving patterns. One of the basketry patterns that has been resuscitated by the foundation is Khid. It is an exquisite handicraft speciality of the Northeast derived and developed from textile

weaving technique. Composed by interweaving bamboo strips that have been pared thin and straight, the intricate, interlocking Khid pattern is now often added on sophisticated bamboo woven basket-like handbags.

Until now, there have been more than 200 Arts and Crafts Skills Development Projects initiated by the SUPPORT Foundation operating all over the country. One of the successful projects is the project at Phanatnikhom, as mentioned previously, which now functions as a cooperative enterprise in order to produce and market their products. For a number of practitioners countrywide to have an additional occupation in the form of local handicrafts to fall back on, the foundation regularly purchases their finished crafted products from them and arranges to sell them through various marketing channels, such as Chitralada stores and the SUPPORT Foundation Fair held annually at Suan Amporn Gardens in Bangkok. This is conformed to His Majesty the King's royal initiative of Sufficiency Economy, where all Thai citizens lead a life that is both self-reliant and sustainable.

In 2001, the government under the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra attempted to take the work of Her Majesty's SUPPORT foundation a step further by initiating a local entrepreneurship stimulus program called One Tambon One Product or OTOP. Aiming to appeal the grass-root people who make up the majority of the country's population, OTOP is part of the populist set of the economic policies coined Thaksinomics. Since there are more than 7,000 sub-districts or tambons in Thailand with populations ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand each, each of them clearly has unique capabilities for producing a huge variety of products. The government gave each sub-district extensive support with production, marketing and distribution of their products. Through the utilisation of indigenous wisdoms and local resources, most of OTOP products are traditional food and crafted goods such as textiles, pottery, wickerwork handicrafts, artistry items, gifts, fashion accessories, household items and many other articles indigenous to each community. Each product is given a rating thanks to its quality, from one star to five stars, by a government agency.

Looking at bamboo craft practices in particular, there are a number of OTOP products from various sub-districts that mark strong traits of local traditions and have been widely accepted both at domestic and international levels. Popular items include handbags and home accessories, like vases and baskets. In fact, OTOP is also used as branding for existing community products and OTOP products in many areas mutually support their local tourism. For example, Bang Chao Cha Sub-district in Ang Thong Province which is home to the Museum of Bamboo Crafts founded in 1997, displaying the history of bamboo basketwork artefacts that Thais have used for generations, such as rice farming tools, animal traps, containers, cooking utensils, baskets, wide-mouthed jars and chicken coops. Before any government agencies came to render any aid, the villagers ran the supplementary vocation of bamboo basketry by themselves due to the abundant supply of local bamboo. As a result, at the present time, a number of villagers are wickerwork artisans, they manage a homestay project in the area and their crafted bamboo items have become OTOP products of high quality.

As a matter of fact, the OTOP program is patterned after Japan's successful project One Village One Product which started in 1979 in Oita Prefecture by its governor Hiramatsu Morihiko in the 1980s for the regional development. However, in general, success does not quite repeat itself in the context of Thailand. Criticisms overflowed in the following years over the selection of local products for promotion under the OTOP brand and the quality of certain OTOP products themselves. One ultimate problem is that if too many small businesses enter a market too quickly, they destroy each other with over-competition. As bamboo can be found countrywide, fine bamboo baskets from Sing Buri Province and Suphan Buri Province look very much alike since they were made using the same technique. It is often that originality is not reflected in the designs. I noticed that possibly it was a mistake to launch the OTOP project on a national scale right from the

beginning, instead of selecting a small number of items for initial implementation. After the coup d'état in 2006, the military junta terminated many Thaksinomics policies and made a couple of changes to the OTOP program. They renamed the program to Local and Community Products; however, the OTOP brand was kept. Currently, the program tends to emphasise on assisting high-quality, unique, competitive products to find a broader market.

## **Korakot Aromdee's Modern Bamboo Craft Practice and the Government's Creative Economy Policy**

Through an exemplar of modern bamboo craft practice, the association between the political infrastructure, economic growth, cultural preservation and the creative industries is going to be further explored here. Whereas Thaksinomics, Shinawatra's populism, puts an importance on reaching out to the grassroots that led to the creation of OTOP program, several years later the government under Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva shifted the focus to the creative class specifically with a new policy on creative economy. Considering that 'human creativity is the ultimate economic resource' (Florida 2002: xiii), the government attempted to boost the nation's economy by putting an emphasis on the implementation of creative economy concept. Creative Economy, a term coined by John Howkins in his book, *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money From Ideas*, comprises the concept of economic power on the basis of applying knowledge, education, creation, and intellectual property linked with a cultural base, accumulation of knowledge in society, and modern technology innovation.

According to a report prepared under the leadership of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Thailand ranked 19th among other countries in the world and the first in ASEAN, with the highest creative industrial value. (The Government Public Relations Department 2011) To advocating local creative industries with a hope to make Thailand the creative economy hub for ASEAN region, the year 2010 has been adopted by the government as the Creative Economy Year, embracing its goal to increase the country's proportion of creative economy value from 12 per cent to 20 per cent of GDP by the year 2012. Hence, a number of projects were set up, including the Creative Economy Fund to help develop creative industries. The strategic plans are now on the national agenda contained in the 11th National Economic and Social Development (NESDB) plan. The major principle is the creation of value by applying knowledge and innovation, together with strength from the diversity of natural resources, culture, and Thai ways of life.

Initiated by the Intellectual Property Department under the Ministry of Commerce, the launching of the PM's Creative Award is intended to encourage innovation in an effort to promote the government's Creative Thailand policy. Basically, using the notion of value creation through human thinking as a rationale, producers or creators are awarded for their works that are based on knowledge, education, creativity and originality, very much about combining cultural roots with innovation. One of the outstanding award receivers is Korakot Aromdee, a bamboo designer-maker who manages to find a way to make arts and crafts on an industrial scale. After his graduation from Silpakorn University, he decided to return home in Phetchaburi province to start his own bamboo craft business that creates beautiful items proudly reflecting Thai identity, community consciousness and environmental awareness. Integrating all the impressions of things surrounded him when he was young, which are kite playing, bamboo and the quiet environment of his hometown, his work subtly functions as storytelling of his life.

Pairing bamboo, which is one of his home town's most abundant resources, with the art of kite making, he has adopted the kite construction techniques taught by his grandfather, who was a master Chula kite maker, to create a variety of exquisite bamboo decorative products, ranging from small home furnishing items to large sculptural lamps. Because of its renewable nature and the fact that it contributes back to

his community, he only uses bamboo that is aged more than three years and properly smoked to ensure strength and pliability. Learning from the local wisdom, natural palmyra syrup is utilised for bamboo slat bending to make curved structures. Today kite-playing is not as popular as they used to be. Instead of witnessing the traditional techniques of kite-making dying out, making use of the same fine materials and techniques to create new striking products seems to be a brilliant way for cultural preservation and value creation. Because the whole making process is extremely time consuming and requires highly skilled craftsmen, it is impossible to find the same piece of work anywhere else in the world. Constantly receiving orders from domestic and international buyers through trade fairs means that he has to deal with producing craft products with intricate details in a large quantity.

With the strong idea that design can better the society, Aromdee believes that by offering career opportunities for the locals, the community will be strengthened. In order to make his products, he passes his designs onto the chief artisan to visualise the technical details and then the chief artisan disseminates tasks to the skilful villagers who are unoccupied from their daily routines to make different elements. He founded his company Korakot International Limited Partnership in 2006, employing only ten workers from within his village. Acknowledging the potential of his practice to improve the lives of those within his community and constantly striving to make this a reality, his work has contributed immensely to the locals, turning a local fishing village into a production unit that generates considerable income for the residents. His work now benefits more than fifty families living in the community. Unquestionably, his practice, which is very much about value creation from human thinking, is in line with the concept of creative economy. This is manifest that design intervention can be a problem-solving tool for livelihood development.

It is quite obvious that a large number of bamboo artefacts produced these days are productive commodities. However, regarded as contemporary craft products, the new beauty has come to light. 'Crafts thus need designers to bridge the gap and allow them to compete with the products and practices of modern industrialisation.' (UNESCO 2005: 4) In other words, designers can be an interface between tradition and modernity, helping match craft production to the needs of modern living. Besides, as stated by to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 'arts and crafts is the most important creative industry for export earnings in developing countries as well as a major item in the exports of developed countries.' (UNCTAD 2008: 116) Without doubt, craft at present must respond to a number of changes, for example, in markets, consumer needs, fashion trends and usage preferences.

## **Conclusion**

Whereas bamboo once was an orphan crop largely ignored by the main landholding agencies, forestry and agriculture, bamboo's amazing versatility, strength, workability, and beauty have given it a longer and more varied role in human culture than any other plant known to humankind. Like many other parts of the world, during the past several decades, the aim of bamboo crafting in Thailand has been greatly altered. At the outset, bamboo was utilised for construction as well as meticulously made into artefacts for household use. Interestingly, a large number of exquisite, well-crafted bamboo artefacts usually mirror the maker's determination and joy of working. Taking Phanatnikhom as an example, the wickerwork of the local craftspeople considerably reflects the practice of Buddhist economics. Through craft activities, today bamboo is remarkable in aiding a developing country like Thailand in sustainable social, economic and environmental development. By creating productive employment opportunities, craft can enhance more equitable income distribution. Bamboo has contributed significantly to the income generation of many poor farmers via the making of bamboo wickerwork products. The success of bamboo craft practices in Thailand relies on three circumstances. First, local wisdom of bamboo wickerwork is available in numerous areas of Thailand, but to

advance the practice, the craft community must be united. Second, the government policies, on either grass-root development or on creative economy, play a vital role in assisting the local bamboo craft practices. And third, design and marketing are crucial tools for of product development and sales.

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