

Paper

Beyond Utility and Glamor: the ‘little way’ of traditional crafts in Global City Singapore

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Summary Statement

This paper explores the stories and practice of some Singaporean independent traditional craftspeople – a Lion Head Maker and Peranakan Kebaya maker – juxtaposed against the backdrop of an outward-gazing and highly-industrialised city. In their persistence and devotion to their craft, they allude to a humble, transcendental strive in the exercise of “making”. The value these self-taught artisans place on the purpose and importance of their craft as vehicles of connection to the country’s cultural heritage, un-selfconsciously reveals an offering of self and spirit in the labour. This paper seeks to suggest that though these traditional crafts are not overtly spiritual in nature, the craftsman’s pursuit beyond individual recognition, and beyond the city state’s consumption-driven ‘Renaissance city’ and ‘creative global city’ ambitions¹, attests more to ‘the beauty of the warm and familiar’ and less that of the noble, the lofty or glamorous.²

Topic

As an archetypal ‘developmental state’, Singapore has long been governed by the dictates of the market, with its *raison d’être* as nation and polity essentially driven by a need to uphold high levels of economic growth. Within this context of the developmental state, arts and culture have been seen as either a revenue-generating ‘creative industry’ or a means of enhancing tourism and liveability³.

Yet despite this ‘hegemony of economic development strategies’ of pragmatism of the arts and culture through cultural policy⁴, there persists a dwindling number of traditional craftspeople who continue to ply their trade in service of some traditional crafts and artform that is fading or simply absent from the public’s imagination.

The topic of traditional or heritage crafts in global city Singapore tends towards a sentimental and nihilistic view that assumes traditional crafts would disappear from the realm of everyday

¹ Ministry of Information and the Arts, “Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore” (Singapore, 2000).; Creative Industries Working Group (CIWG), “Creative Industries Development Strategy: Propelling Singapore’s Creative Economy” (Singapore: Economic Review Committee Services Subcommittee, 2002).

² Sōetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, trans. Bernard Leach, Rev. ed. (New York: Kodansha International, 1989), 198, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/p/unknown-craftsman-soetsu-yanagi/1101340154/2676432623063>.

³ Lily Kong, “Ambitions of a Global City: Arts, Culture and Creative Economy in ‘Post-Crisis’ Singapore,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 18, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 279–94, doi:10.1080/10286632.2011.639876.; Terence Lee, “Creative Shifts and Directions,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 10, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 281–99, doi:10.1080/1028663042000312525.

⁴ Lily Kong, “Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas,” *Geoforum*, Culture Industries and Cultural Policy; Globalizing Cities; 31, no. 4 (November 2000): 409–24, doi:10.1016/S0016-7185(00)00006-3.

experience. This is evident when one peruses the descriptions of some national agencies to further and promote the arts and culture – the National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board. The aims of fundings and grants are largely directed towards supporting already established traditional arts groups, companies, and organisations; for the purposes of ‘digitising and documenting materials of historical value to preserve Singapore’s artistic legacy’; have a strong focus on traditional performance and musical groups; heritage festivals and exhibitions; or community projects to raise awareness on heritage. According to Lee (2016), ‘the term “culture” tended to focus on the exotic, or how “culture” and “traditional” arts could be used for tourism and other income-generating purposes’⁵, with an emphasis on an ‘arts for survival’ mentality⁶. Beauty in the arts, humanities, and crafts are aspirations that have taken a backburner in its march for survival. In the words of her founding Prime Minister, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, “poetry is a luxury we cannot afford”⁷.

In the following case studies, the stories and practice of two craftspeople, the Lion Head maker and Peranakan Kebaya maker, is presented. Each of these crafts are a dying art form that struggles to remain relevant to the modern city-dweller – the first, an eroding traditional sport and ritual; the second, a rarefied item of vintage ethnic fashion in the face of fast-fashion; and both, victims to mass production.

Scope / Case Study

Two traditional crafts, and their Singaporean craftsmen are discussed. While these crafts are not specifically Singaporean in origin, but call upon association with a wider Southeast Asian milieu, they are a significant part of its heritage as they remain firmly embedded in the cultural and collective memory of the Singaporean people.

The Lion Head is the integral headpiece to the Lion Dance ritual which one may witness during the Chinese Lunar New Year in Chinatowns all the world over. This garish, fascinating, and mythical creature and its pugilistic dance performed by Chinese clan members during annual festivities and grand openings of businesses, is believed to ward off bad luck and herald prosperity to all spectators. In Singapore, this ritual is dwindling in practice and popularity, and therefore, the numbers of Lion Heads and costumes ordered and purchased has whittled from few hundreds a year in the 1990s to barely 30-40 today⁸. These customised giant Lion Heads are made from woven bamboo structures, gauze, and high-fibre paper, then hand-painted and adorned with eye lashes and fur trimmings. Yet in recent years, the demand for quality, handmade costumes has fallen because of mass-produced made-in-China lions, which can be bought online.

In the second case, the Peranakan Kebaya maker ‘paints’ a landscape of vines, flowers and birds with thread and the roving needle of a treadle sewing machine in the style of ‘sulam’ or ‘free-motion’ embroidery⁹. This particular piece of clothing is the traditional dress of Peranakan women – an ethnic community with origins in the Malayan Straits Settlements. Up to the mid-1900s, Peranakan women had various kebayas made for different occasions, from daily to formal wear. However, these days, kebayas are more likely worn as exotic traditional outfits at weddings or once a year at Peranakan family reunions. This type of dress has instead found its home in the Peranakan Museum as a cultural artefact of the country’s

⁵ Jason Lim and Terence Lee, eds., *Singapore: Negotiating State and Society, 1965-2015 (Paperback)* - Routledge (London; New York, 2016), 175, <https://www.routledge.com/Singapore-Negotiating-State-and-Society-1965-2015/Lim-Lee/p/book/9781138998650>.

⁶ Kong, “Culture, Economy, Policy: Trends and Developments”

⁷ Simon Long, “The Singapore Exception,” *The Economist*, July 18, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21657606-continue-flourish-its-second-half-century-south-east-asias-miracle-city-state>.

⁸ “Making Lions’ Heads,” *The New Paper*, accessed May 3, 2017, </backstage/content/making-lions-heads-cny-series-part-6-6>.

⁹ “Defiantly, He Weaves Life into a Dying Peranakan Craft,” *Channel NewsAsia*, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/defiantly-he-weaves-life-into-a-dying-peranakan-craft-7969118>.

history. Modern mass-produced kebayas can instead be made at a fraction of the price and time due to the use of computerised electric machines.

At the same time, I discuss how each of these crafts have been variously encountered by modernity – in the form of collaborations – and how each has responded, interacted, and laboured on. I seek to explore these persevering efforts in craft and excellence by these artisans through the lens of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's teaching of the 'little way'¹⁰ of humility and love in service of a greater vocation that transcended, in her case, the confines of the Carmelite convent.

Intended Conclusions

At first glance these crafts may appear to exist in a traditional and domestic realm, yet their labors and doggedness transcend the pragmatism of a survivalism narrative of this city-state. Each of these craftmakers' journeys reveal the struggle of pursuing, perfecting, and sustaining their craft and work in the face of modernity.

Yet, this poses more questions for the fate of such traditional craft in Singapore. On one hand, the path of inevitable demise seems certain in this condition of mass production, in a country that is more enthusiastic with documenting certain aspects of heritage as artefact. On the other, it seems the traditional craftsman would sooner need to innovate and mechanize for economic value-creation, in order to remain relevant. Can there, instead, be a middle way?

¹⁰ Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, ed. Mother Agnes of Jesus, trans. Michael Day CONG ORAT (Charlotte, N.C.: TAN Books, 2010).