

Design for the Sustainment of Traditional Making Practices:

A Research Study in Central China

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OVERVIEW Central China is a rich multi-cultural and multi-religious region with many traditional making practices. In recent decades, however, rapid economic growth and urban development has created severe challenges for these practices. This research presents a case study based discussion, that was conducted in this region to investigate the opportunities and challenges for sustaining local traditions. In particular, for identifying areas where design could make a constructive contribution in ways that accord with contemporary understandings of design for sustainability. The research study employed qualitative forms of investigation, including desk-based theoretical research on crafts and design for sustainability and on traditional making practices within a Chinese context. Initial analysis of primary and secondary data suggests that design's contributions might not be solely related to new product development but also in related areas such as marketing, branding and packaging design. In addition, some concerns have been identified in relation to sustainability.

Keywords: traditional making practices; design for sustainability; design and crafts; intangible cultural heritage; central China

Introduction

With the rapid and unrelenting rise of modernisation and globalisation, traditional ways of living and manufacture have fallen into gradual decline. This decline includes traditional festivals, celebrations and religious activities that once required elaborately crafted artefacts, which helped sustain traditional making practices (UNESCO 2020). Today, fewer opportunities remain for traditional makers to earn a decent living by producing craft artefacts. Nowadays, a career as a craft practitioner is regarded as precarious and young people do not regard it as an attractive option (Holroyd 2018). In China, as in many other places, many traditional makers have struggled to adapt and remain competitive in modern industrial economies (Hu 2017).

In recent decades, through their active involvement with UNESCO (Intangible Cultural Heritage ICH) recognition (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>), traditional making practices and outstanding traditional makers are identified and supported under China's ICH and ICH Inheritor Programmes (Maags 2019). In addition, since the Plan on Revitalizing China's Traditional Crafts was implemented in 2017, considerable effort has also been stepped up to improve the design, production

and quality of traditional products (Hu 2017). Due to the recent and dramatic 'heritage boom' and 'crafts fever' in China, there is strong justification for researching this area more thoroughly in order to better understand how design can make an appropriate contribution whilst also ensuring the traditions and authenticity of these important cultural practices are properly respected.

The region of interest for this doctoral research study is central China, comprising the provinces of Henan, Hubei and Hunan (see Figure 1). This region is an important site for Chinese civilisation, with the origins of the Central Plain culture in the Yellow River basin and Chu culture in the Yangtze River basin (China Daily 2017; Xu 2004, 32). It is also a multi-cultural and multi-religious region, featuring 57 local traditional crafts that have been identified as ICH of national significance (ICH China 2020). With the support of the 'Rise of Central China' plan, this region has seen rapid economic growth and urban development in recent years (Wang 2019). These socio-economic changes also create new opportunities but also challenges for local crafts development.



Figure 1. Location of the research study - central China.

Traditional crafts in context

Traditional crafts are constantly made by communities and groups in response to their environment, including their interactions with nature and their continuation and adaptation of practices handed down from their predecessors. These practices and traditionally rooted artefacts provide local people with a sense of identity and contribute to cultural distinctiveness (Jung and Walker 2018). UNESCO recognizes these traditional making practices as important elements of cultural heritage. Through this convention, greater efforts are paid to sustainment of the intangible aspects that enable the creation of artefacts, including the continuity of knowledge, practices, skills, expressions, beliefs and traditions

within communities (UNESCO 2018, 5). Specifically, in the less economically developed countries, the development of traditional crafts has been strongly supported by UNESCO, and these craft programmes are closely related to local community self-empowerment, youth employment, gender equality and the eradication of poverty (Vencatachellum 2019, 28, 36).

Traditional crafts practices, because they are localized and place-specific, normally take into consideration and ameliorate any environmental impacts associated with the activities. Local, commonly available materials are often used, such as wood, bamboo, cotton or glass, which are renewable and/or recyclable (Zhan and Walker 2019). Such place-based knowledge about materials and environmental conditions contribute to local ecological balance and environmental stewardship. In addition, with reference to Schwartz's research on human values (2012), the values and priorities of those engaged in traditional making practices tend to fall mainly within the cluster of intrinsic values, which can be understood as self-transcending (beyond self - benevolence and universalism) and conservation (tradition and security) values (Walker, Evans, and Mullagh 2019). Also, positive aspects associated with creative processes, such as self-actualization, fulfilment and happiness, show strong associations between these practices and personal well-being (Pöllänen and Voutilainen 2017)

With the relatively recent growth in industrial standardization, cultural homogenization and consumption-oriented economics, products that are place-based, culture-specific and long-lasting are being re-examined by users around the globe. In particular, people value the perceived authenticity, uniqueness and originality of handmade objects, which has led to a growing market for both traditional and contemporary crafts. For example, the craft sector contributes £3.4bn to the UK economy each year (TBR 2014, 3). In developing countries, crafts can be even more significant to the economy. In Tunisia, for example, its 300,000 craft workers produce 3.8% of the country's annual GDP, and in Morocco, the craft economy accounts for 19% of its GDP (Vencatachellum 2019, 31).

As discussed, existing literature indicates that traditional making practices can be very meaningful in terms of social-cultural continuity, environmental stewardship, human values, and economic viability. As such, design researchers have shown an increased interest in craft practices. The value of crafts has been discussed from different perspectives, such as practice-led design research (Suib, Engelen, and Crul 2020; Nimkulrat 2012; Wood, Rust, and Horne 2009), design for sustainability (Väänänen Pöllänen 2020; Walker, Evans, and Mullagh 2019; Zhan and Walker 2019), social design (Mamidipudi 2018; Kang 2016), and co-design (Wang, Bryan-Kinns, and Ji 2016; Tung 2012). Among these, a meaning-based design approach the Quadruple Bottom Line of Design for Sustainability (QBL) was proposed by Walker (2014, 42, 65). This approach has been used to investigate many traditional making practices all around the world (Walker, Evans, and Mullagh 2019). According to Walker, design interventions in traditional crafts can be considered at four levels. Significantly, in this approach, a meaningful action is understood to be an approach that is appropriate to the context in which it is performed. The fourth element, which relates to economics, is seen as the means for enabling the first three:

- **Practical Meaning** – actions that are context appropriate and serve utilitarian needs while taking into account and minimizing negative environmental impacts;
- **Social Meaning** – the context-related social and ethical implications of craft practices and cultural continuance;
- **Personal Meaning** – priorities valued by craftspeople as individuals, including moral rectitude and conscience, a sense of contribution and spiritual significance, and inner values and well-being;

- **Economic Means** – ensuring financial viability of the practice to enable the first three elements.

(Walker, Evans, and Mullagh 2019).

The primary question for this research study is as follows:

How design can make constructive contributions to the sustainment of traditional craft practices in central China, especially in ways that accord with the principles of sustainability, as described in Walker's QBL?

Methods

Qualitative forms of investigation are employed in this study to provide precise and 'thick' descriptions of the local context, situations, and values "'from the inside out", from the point view of the people who participate' (Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004, 3). The research adopts a combination of deductive and inductive strategies employing qualitative methods (Bryman 2016, 21-24). An expansive literature review on traditional making practices and a secondary research on Chinese craft revitalization activities provide deductive perspectives on craft and design for sustainability, and empirical research via field studies in central China offers an induction approach to expand and strengthen the understandings, especially in regard to particular contexts and practices (see Figure 2).

Field research was conducted in twelve cities (see Figure 3) between July and September 2019. Semi-structured interviews were extensively used, as they are open-ended with greater flexibility and therefore suitable for gaining in-depth understandings from which particular and generalizable findings can be determined (Burns 2000, 424-425). The interviews from this region were purposive, focusing on different craft fields (illustrated in Figure 4) and different craft-related stakeholders, in order to 'retain a holistic and real-world perspective' of craft development in this region (Yin 2014, 4). In total, 32 interviews were undertaken, including eighteen craft-makers who have been also officially designated as ICH Inheritors (a Chinese version of the Living Human Treasure), and fourteen craft-related people. Of the eighteen inheritors, six run small or medium-sized craft businesses. Of the fourteen craft-related interviewees, two were design-makers, two businessmen, six hobby craftspeople, one governmental official, one craft retailer, one design director and one manager.

Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes. To understand local priorities and values, participant interviewees were all asked about their motivations, details of their work, the perceived values of their work, and the challenges they faced in their practice. For design-makers and designers, to make sense of current design intervention in local crafts, questions about their design experience, concepts and detailed process were also touched upon. The interviews were transcribed and are currently being open coded to categorize key themes (Flick 2014, 404-406).

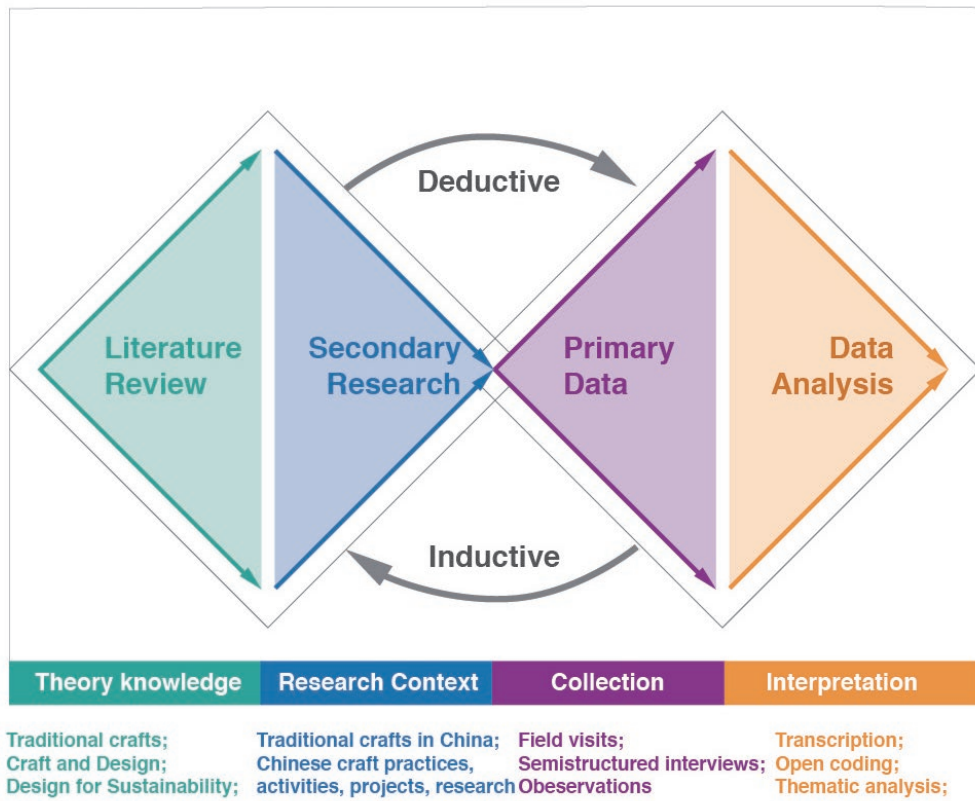


Figure 2. A combination of deductive and inductive strategies implemented in this research.

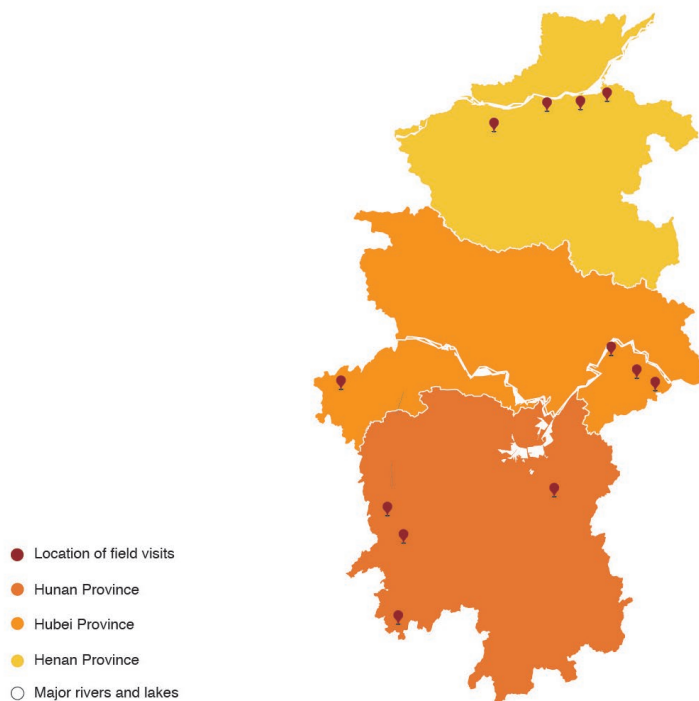


Figure 3. Location of twelve visited cities in central China where interviews were conducted.



Figure 4. A succinct taxonomy of participants interviewed within this research study.

Initial finding and discussion

A comprehensive literature review on crafts in China identified practices, activities and projects are supported principally by a top-down mechanism. For example, the China National Arts Fund (CNAF) is a non-government organization formed in 2013 to boost China's cultural influence. Some of its recent funded projects provide training for traditional makers and are conducted by academic institutions and universities (CNAF 2018). Similarly, within China's ICH Programme, an annual allowance is provided by the government for designated ICH artisans to disseminate their traditional craft practices and train apprentices (Maags 2018). In addition, in response to China's initiative to revive and appreciate its traditional crafts industry, many large companies provide various forms of support via their corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects. One typical example is BMW's CSR programme called China Culture Journey. This programme helps sustain Chinese ICH and traditional crafts in a variety of ways, including cultural exchanges, creative collaborations and exhibitions (BMW 2018).

Impressively, in many craft businesses, brands and enterprises in China, design makes a significant contribution to marketing, branding, product development and packaging activities. However, through initial analysis of interviews with craftspeople and designers in central China, a series of sustainability related themes and problems were also identified. As the Chinese craft sector is

becoming influenced by modern markets and is re-shaped by modern manufacturing technologies, many craft enterprises and brands turn to luxury and fashionable goods, which caters to consumers' externally-oriented goals and extrinsic values, including personal aspiration and financial success, social status and recognition, and self-image (Kasser and Ryan 1996). In contrast, the primarily intrinsic values represented by traditional crafts, as discussed earlier, seems to be largely neglected. However, research on external materialistic values has shown that they are negatively associated with ecological attitudes and behaviours, personal well-being, and socially responsible behaviours, such as helping others and volunteering (Kasser 2015). Therefore, a design direction that constantly contributes to the market, economic growth, consumption and innovation is problematic in terms of sustainability; not least because these are invariably accompanied by excessive energy use, resource use and waste production caused by rapid obsolescence and replacement of 'positional' and fashion-oriented goods.

Further research activities

Through the analysis of primary and secondary data, this research study has identified that design can meaningfully contribute to the sustainment of traditional craft practices by sensitively and respectfully developing context-appropriate directions in the areas of business practice. It is also important to recognize that select current design interventions identified are solely serving, and encouraging, mainstream market and consumers' extrinsic values. This is problematic, because not only it tends to erode the integrity of the values, priorities and practices inherent to traditional crafts but in so doing it also runs counterproductive to the principles of sustainability. These issues need to be critically debated further and investigated in relation to specific cases, and recommendations will be made to improve the subtle nature of these design interventions. In addition, following the analysis of thirty-two interviews with ICH inheritors and craft stakeholders, the local situation, priorities and values will be further interpreted and critically reflected upon. This will provide a wider and deeper understanding of traditional making practices in central China and provide new, evidence-based insights into the potential of design in sustaining traditional crafts.

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