CASE STUDY 16

Traditional crafts and income generation in Penang, Malaysia[[1]](#footnote-1)

This example shows how raising awareness about traditional crafts within a community triggered activities that improved the transmission of the associated skills and raised the social status and income opportunities of practitioners.

#### An audit and a heritage education programme

The island of Penang’s rich architectural heritage, its beaches, its hills and its food have long been promoted to tourists, but the promotion and safeguarding of traditional crafts were usually neglected. In 2000 the Penang Heritage Trust conducted a survey of traditional artisans and traders to ensure they were not negatively affected by the repeal of rent-control provisions. Alongside the audit, a heritage education programme was launched to introduce these traditional crafts to schoolchildren. Some of the children chose to attach themselves to traditional artisans in informal apprenticeships and also to document their work:

For the children it was an enriching experience, for the artisan trader, often aged, it was initially perplexing, even a little annoying (all these noisy children …), subsequently it was somewhat amusing (they’re so inept …) and eventually it was gratifying and pleasing (… they actually think my work is so important).[[2]](#footnote-2)

#### Promoting handicrafts and according recognition to artisans

The next stage of the programme involved the children and the artisans in promoting traditional handicrafts to a wider market and developing Heritage Trails to showcase their work. The children drew up flyers for distribution to visitors. This was initially done on a very low budget, but the State tourism boards soon financed promotional brochures for distribution on a wide scale.

The Living Heritage Treasures Awards of the Penang Heritage Trust were established to recognize the work of the artisans. Awardees, selected from public nominations, received publicity, public acclaim and honour, and financial assistance for the rest of their lives. Their skills, processes and artisan works are fully documented for posterity. One of the awardees, a traditional signboard carver, told news reporters a year after receiving the award that he had never previously felt so moved or so encouraged about pursuing his profession. His family, who had previously been dismissive of his work, were, for the first time, openly proud of him and the work that he had been doing all his life. At the same time, he now needed help in his workshop to meet the demand for new signboards.

These initiatives thus created greater public awareness of the value of traditional crafts, promoted transmission of these crafts to younger people and also helped to generate increased income for traditional artisans.

1. . This case study is drawn from Lin Lee Loh-Lim, 2007, ‘Handicrafts in the Context of Sustainable Cultural Tourism’, UNESCO-EIIHCAP Regional Meeting, Safeguarding Intangible Heritage and Sustainable Cultural Tourism: Opportunities and Challenges, Hué, Viet Nam, 11–13 December 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Lin Lee Loh-Lim, 2007, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)