

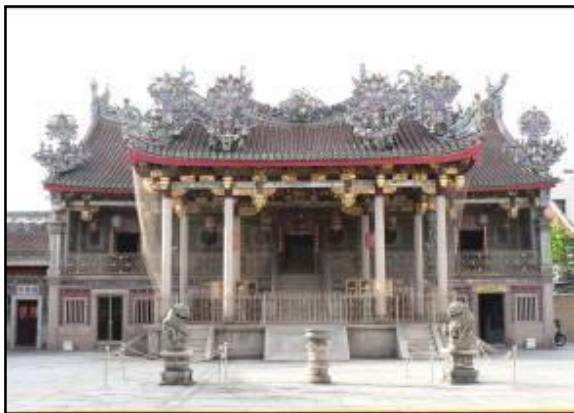
Case Study 2:

Stories on the Wall Understanding Granite Carvings

This program was one of the creative arts workshops conducted by Arts-ED in Penang, Malaysia in 2001. Around 15 participants, aged from 12 to 17 years, were recruited from various schools. The program has been selected as a case study to illustrate how arts education can help young people access the cultural heritage of their built environment and understand the history, values and significance of the built environment to the community by interacting intimately with the space.

Background

The historical town of Georgetown in Penang, where this program was conducted, has some outstanding examples heritage buildings that reflect the multicultural backgrounds of the migrant population who settled here. The architectural forms and decorative elements of Chinese temples and clan houses are particularly iconic but its religious and philosophical meaning has been lost over time.



The Khoo Kongsi Temple, George Town, Penang

In an attempt to recover this lost meaning, a creative program was devised to study the Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi 'temple', located within the Khoo Kongsi clan compound.

Local Design and Motifs as a Cultural Resource

Built in 1906, the temple displays fine granite carving, woodcarving, and painting on wood and fresco painting. The three common styles of stone carving found are permeable carvings, 3-dimensional carving and relief carving which display decorative patterns, Chinese script, figurative scenes and symbolic icons. Carved Chinese characters express wishes for longevity and good health, plant and animal icons symbolise values such as harmony and virtue, human figures in action tell stories of

warriors and lords as well as fishermen or children who had exceptional qualities or showed exemplary behaviour.

Program Goal

This particular program was aimed at enabling children to appreciate and understand the cultural significance of iconic relief carvings on the temple walls and the meaning it conveyed to users of the building. The locale was selected because of its strong historical, artistic and cultural significance of the building to the Chinese ethnic group. It is one of the best examples of Chinese temple architecture and craftsmanship in Southeast Asia.

The Structure of the Program

The creative arts workshop with young participants took approximately between 10 to 15 full days. The age group of participants ranged between 11 to 16 years and the number generally did not exceed 15 participants. The workshop was facilitated by a visual artist and a performing artist.

i. Visit to a Granite Carver

Traditional craftsmen who actually carved the walls of the Khoo Kongsi were originally brought in from China and returned home upon completing the job. Participants had to make a visit to an active tombstone carver to understand the challenges of carving granite stone, the stone's qualities, the craft of stone carving and the different styles of carving.



Observing a tombstone carver

ii. Site Visit to Temple

Participants were introduced to the architecture and function of the clan complex to the different types of carvings in the temple. They were then given exploratory activities (observation and rubbings) to identify the different motifs found on carved granite panels on the exterior walls, and asked to locate

carvings which depict location, animals, plants, human figures and object. Participants were also introduced to the religious/cultural symbolism of the icons through a talk by an expert.



Introduction to granite carving through hands-on activities

iii. Analysis and Interpretation of Carvings

Learning activities were focused on carvings on the exterior walls of the temple. These carvings depict scenes from traditional moral stories themed on filial piety. Each carved panel contains only one scene from each story. Since the residents at the time were very familiar with these legends, the one scene acted as a catalyst to help viewers recollect the whole story and reflect on Confucian moral values on filial piety contained in the stories.



Scenes from the moral stories and legends carved in relief on granite

As a start, participants were assigned to read three of the Chinese moral stories and were given its historical and cultural context. Participants then discussed the themes and the significance of the legends in contemporary society. Participants then proceeded to locate the carved panels carrying a scene which matched any of the scenes from the stories they had read.

iv Reconstructing the Narrative using Comic Drawing

In this activity the participants were introduced to the idea of interpreting the moral stories using several possible creative arts. Participants analysed the characters, action and emotion depicted in the carving and dramatised the scenes from the carved panel.

The participants were also asked to reproduce one of the carved scenes in a comic format. Later they were asked to use their imagination and produce all the scenes from the same legend using the written story as a guide. [NOTE: a summary of the selected legend is provided at the end of this case study]



Comic illustrations created by participants

v. Creative Synthesis

Participants brainstormed various creative arts ways in which they could communicate the stories and particularly the morals contained within the stories. Several creative forms were selected and executed by different groups of participants:

- *Storytelling using a scroll box* - Scenes from the moral story were illustrated on a scroll and the story was told orally as the scroll was rotated.
- *Puppetry* - Participants carved two dimensional puppet characters and used shadow puppetry as a technique to tell the story.
- *Calendar* - Scenes from the story were used to illustrate each month of the calendar.
- *Lampshade* - Each scene was illustrated using ink on rice paper and the various ink painted scenes were assembled to create a lampshade which depicted a different scene on each panel.



Showcase performance for the community by participants using scroll-box storytelling and shadow puppetry



Conclusion: Reflections on the Case Study

The program offered a multi-modal approach incorporating games, drawing and acting. It had carefully built-in incentives, interactive activities and imaginary possibilities to stimulate young people's curiosity and interest in the traditional cultural artefacts. Young people also had the opportunity to synthesise their learning through a variety of creative outcomes. This allowed those with different capacities/intelligences to comprehend meaning in their own way.

Formal art education in schools and institutions tend to emphasise 'technique', often reproducing art forms dissociated from life. Widening the scope of arts education into the environment and community (beyond the limits of the classroom) in this program helped young participant to come closer to artistic

forms associated with local life and comprehend the meaning and function of traditional craft in relation to the local cultural context.

In an indirect manner the program highlights cultural history, environment, language and the arts related to the Chinese settlers. A similar program extended to cover temples or shrines of other cultural groups can advance education for cultural understanding.

SUBJECTS/THEMES	CREATIVE ARTS	LOCAL CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE
History	-	Migration History of Chinese
Literature	-	Chinese Myths and Tales
Architecture	Photography Sketches	Chinese Temple Building
Language	Preparing a script for storytelling	Traditional Moral Stories
Arts	Rubbings Comic Sketches Illustration Storyboard Drama	Traditional carved motifs and decorations and their symbolism
Philosophy		Chinese Feng Shui, geomancy and yin yang philosophies (of Chinese culture).
Science	Stone carving	Traditional stone carving tools and techniques.

The examination of a traditional art/craft within its historical context provides a path of discovery to the past, but the use of child-friendly modern creative and creative arts can help the new generation to comprehend artistic concepts and values from the past and carry them into the future.

Contributors to Program Design:

Ang Bee Saik (dramatist)

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Note:

Sample Moral Story – ‘Carp for Wicked Stepmother’

This legend basically illustrates the value of filial piety, evoking what was viewed as a human virtue, a sense of responsibility and duty among clan members.

Wang lost his mother at an early age. His father then took a new wife who ill-treated Wang and spoke ill of him to his father. Despite all that, Wang remained true and devoted to his parents. One day his stepmother fell ill and needed to eat carp to recover. Upon learning this Wang headed for the river to catch them but unfortunately the river had frozen because of the bitter winter. Undaunted, Wang prostrated himself naked on the ice, praying fervently. He endured the cold and eventually the ice melted beneath him. Out from the icy waters jumped two carps, which he quickly caught and took home to cook for his stepmother. Her eyes were brimming with tears when she saw filial Wang returning home; still shivering from the cold, with the two carps he caught for her. (Wang Xiang of Jin Dynasty – AD 265-420 from ‘An Anthology of 24 Stories of Filial Piety ‘compiled by Khoo Kay Hock and Rita Lim-Khoo. Late 90’s)