

## **Modification for Business Survival among Pottery Entrepreneurs at Koh Kret, Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province**

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### **Abstract**

In the business decline stage, the pottery entrepreneurs must strive to overcome obstacles and maintain their business longevity. How these pottery entrepreneurs cope with problems and apply business strategies are crucial and interesting aspects, which can set a path for other pottery entrepreneurs. This research aimed to explore their problems and business survival techniques as well as synthesize information. Qualitative data were collected through interviewing and observing 7 informants, namely, 3 pottery entrepreneurs, 2 pottery makers and 2 community philosophers who are all residents of Koh Kret, Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province. Acquired data were subjected to content and document analysis. The findings suggest problems in production cost, economic conditions and product design. Since the demand of pottery products have subsided, those involved in pottery business had focused making products based on customer preferences besides making marketing strategy more unique and preserving indigenous knowledge to achieve business products for sale as well as adapting to the business atmosphere to attract more tourists and boost local economy.

**Keywords:** *pottery entrepreneur, business decline stage, business longevity, modification, local economy, synthesize information*

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### **1. Introduction**

History of pottery has long been the (Wannanas, 1990) measurement standard in human civilization. Pottery is one of the oldest human inventions, originating before the Neolithic period. Pottery making originated together with human cooking knowledge. Pottery use dated back at least a thousand years ago were handmade, whereas the present earthenware were mostly manufactured by machine in which the design and shape are controlled by the machine and thus diminishing delicate handicraft. The magnificence appearance of earthenware is no longer present in earthenware for worshipping Buddha, which means that both locals and Buddha used similar earthenware. In the olden days the utensils for Buddha's offering were kept separately from locals' utensils.

Pottery products represent cultural transformation that emphasizes the influence of cultural capital on individual and community behavior. This cultural capital manifests and bonds with specific values, livelihood, economy and social norms. Nowadays, pottery has become one of Thailand's export products that generated high income as much as 8,000 million baht, pushing Thailand towards being a key manufacturer among ASEAN countries (Kanjathonchai, 2012) Now that most fine sculptors and craftsman who could form patterns of jars, wash basins and elaborate carving has deceased, only few elder intellects or local philosophers remain transmitting knowledge and telling stories. Society is evolving so fast that no one cares to inherit such culture. Earlier after completing Primary Grade 4, some children would leave the school to help with their family pottery business. Now that more children have the opportunity to further their education, enabled to select other dignified and honored careers with steady income, none would want to go back to pottery business (Yusup, 1991). Moreover, the advent of product replacement and reduction of buyers had narrowed market demand for pottery products (Suvaree Yodchim, 2015) Moreover, the production process has encountered many problems, i.e. limited furnace locations, shortages of potter and carvers. In addition, there is less preference on raw material sources, coupled with more consumers switching to use plastic and metal products, inconsistent support from the governmental sector on equipment and materials, product design, channel of distribution that hardly met community needs even though such efforts help improving living quality and economic conditions of certain population groups. Nonetheless, not all of them received assistance because some were left fending off themselves. This is due from lacking self-development process that should be supported by the government agencies, poor

coordination, duplicating functions without an organized action plan and proper designing, production and marketing system, including the lack of skilled craftsman to transfer knowledge, incompatible aggregation and inconsistent community product distribution.

Pottery maker is the traditional profession of migratory Mon that established their settlement at Koh Kret, Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province. In the beginning, pottery was made for household use and later turned into a main trade due to Mon's lifestyle involving around the pottery business. From the innate ability to make a living as a pottery maker to the proper quality of clay at Koh Kret for pottery production, Mon settlement has engaged in pottery making ever since. Koh Kret pottery is uncoated, opaque earthenware and very porous with light orange to red color that are burnt with 1,000 – 1,200 Celsius. Koh Kret jugs can keep the water cool with a nice aroma and the unique and elaborate hand carving sets it apart from other earthenware (Yusup, 1991).

This study aimed to explore the relevant facts to existing problem conditions among the pottery makers, including their adaptations for survival at Koh Kret, Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province, leading to pottery process development, in which is suitable for the area surroundings, social structure and product improvement to meet the demand of targeted consumers. It is expected that the research outcomes would further benefit the community well-beings, society and the country.

## **2. Objective**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to study the problems and modifications for the survival of pottery makers in the area of Koh Kret, Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province, and to synthesize the modifications for survival of pottery occupation in such areas. It is expected that the findings can establish the direction for pottery entrepreneurs, especially at Koh Kret to survive business downturn and work their ways to prosperity.

## **3. Materials and Methodology**

### **3.1. Study Site**

This research was conducted at Koh Kret Community that is located south of Pak Kret District, Nonthaburi Province. Koh Kret is a small artificial "island", which resulted from a canal being dug nearly 300 years ago. Koh Kret is also one of Thailand's oldest settlements of Mon people who were a dominant tribe of central Thailand. The study focuses on 7 villages, namely, Moo 1 Ban Bon Ban Lang or Ban on, Moo 2 Ban Klong Salakul, Moo 3 Ban Salakul, Moo 4 Ban Klong Sa Namooi, Moo 5 Ban Tanam, Moo 6 Ban Wat Saothongthonmy g and Moo 7 Ban Ong Ang.

### **3.2. Population and Informant**

Research subjects selected by Purposive Sampling and Snowball Sampling were residents of Koh Kret comprised of 3 pottery entrepreneurs, 2 potters and 2 community philosophers residing in the studied area.

- Community philosophers are the experts on historical pottery background, production process and experts on pottery crafts essential for community economy and business survival.
- Business entrepreneur is the operator of pottery business, generating income from selling pottery products.
- A potter is an individual hired to produce pottery products.

### **3.3. Research Instrument**

Semi-structured or guided interviews were employed in the study coupled with observation to collect data on problems and modification tactics for survival among the pottery makers in the study area and extract information from relevant documents and researches on pottery.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done through observation by comparing interviewed data with field data as well as conducting Content and Documentary Analysis.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Findings from the investigation and examination through archival records and interviews suggest that only few pottery makers remain in pottery business due to changes as shown in the following interview

##### 4.1 Variation in production cost

###### 4.1.1 Increasing cost of Clay

Price of clay for pottery making is increased because clay must be brought from outside Koh Kret. Clay at Koh Kret is depleted from constant digging and clay must be left for deposit at least 10 years to make it suitable for pottery as mentioned by a participant.

*"Clay must come from Central Plain where clay has a fine texture, firm and able to hold water with less porous."*

4.1.2 High cost of fuel because firewood are difficult to find locally. At first firewood is so abundant where the entrepreneurs can ask leftover chip wood from factories at no cost. Now, they have value and quite expensive. Some entrepreneurs switch to gas or electric furnaces which are easier to control the temperature during the production process.

(Interview, Pottery Maker 1, 2017)

###### 4.1.3 High Cost of Labor that changed through time has increased the pottery price.

*"Time has passed by and money also changed its value. For example, when I was in Mata Yom Suksa, during the school break, I worked in the hotel and received wage of 5 baht. Now the minimum wage is 300 baht."*

(Interview, Pottery Maker 1 and 2, 2017)

##### 4.2 Scare Source of Raw Material

4.2.1 Clay available at Koh Kret in the past was suitable for pottery production and also cost-saving for pottery entrepreneurs. Since the source of raw material has depleted rapidly, the source of clay for pottery became scare. At present, clay is imported from Pathumthani at a higher price where it is suitable for making pottery products:

*"Before, we dig up clay at Pak Kret. Now, we cannot find the seller, we have to go to Samkok, Pathumthani. Once it is gone, we move the dig to Ayutthaya or AngThong"*

(Interview, Pottery Maker 1, 2017)

4.2.2 Firewood is used as fuel in pottery making it easily found in the past. At present, firewood is becoming scare raw material as mentioned by a participant:

*"Firewood is difficult to find at this time. It is considered the destruction of nature and the cause of greenhouse effect. We need to observe the surroundings and concern on environmental impact. We can use a gas furnace, but it needs lots of clay and over million baht to build large a large furnace."*

(Interview Pottery Maker 1, 2017)

As a result, many pottery factories adapted to the surroundings from wood-burning furnace to stove furnace although the cost of building a gas furnace is rather high, but firewood is scare and costly as mentioned by participants:

###### 4.2.3 Labor: Skilled-labor shortage in pottery businesses hinder business progress

Few potters changed occupation, but transferring pottery knowledge is only learning within a family as mentioned by a participant:

*"I like arts, and carving because I have to see it every day, so it is in my vein. Most potters can make pottery products, but the different is the carving. Each potter must learn the pattern himself, practicing quite often until he can memorize it. The important thing is one must like doing it and doing it slowly even though it takes longer. Just like this piece, I have been carving it for 3 days and it's still undone."*

(Interview, Pottery Entrepreneur 2, 2017)

##### Changes in Economic Structure

Due to the presence of threatening rivals in the pottery business and the influx of similar products from various sellers drive the pottery price downward. Because the sale of Koh Kret clay pots was not as good as in the past, pottery makers had no choice but changing to manufacture smaller products or make more attractive design. Participants expressed their concerns on such matter as follows:

*“In the old days, roughly 30 factories were in the pottery business. Once the business operators had encountered tough competition, they closed down the businesses in a hurry. Prior to Ratchaburi Clay pots entering the market, we sold lots of clay pots. Now that they set their clay pots at a lower price than ours, we have to switch to produce smaller product such as cups, soup pots and they sell quicker. Not so long, some operators compete with us, but our product has a unique carving design that is rather difficult to copy.”*

(Interview, Pottery Entrepreneur 1, Pottery Entrepreneur 3, Potter Maker 2, 2017)

Also, the impact caused by substitute merchandise as mentioned a pottery entrepreneur on consumers' preferences on varieties of products available in the market:

*“Some like ceramic products and at one time consumers had strong demand for substitute product such as plastic pot.”*

(Interview: Pottery Entrepreneur 2, 2017)

Because consumers have become more selective when buying products, pottery makers must focus on making products to meet consumers' preferences:

*“Most store merchandises are displayed according to consumers' preferences. We have monitored frequent questions on certain merchandise that has marketing potential.”*

(Interview: Pottery Entrepreneur 1, 2017)

Economic crises in 1997 can have significant negative effects on the sale of Koh Kret pottery businesses as told by one of the participants:

*“Poor economy has triggered overall effect on Koh Kret pottery business. Some residents resigned from their permanent job to enter pottery business. At first, they made a good profit, but soon the bubble burst, the pottery business went down and they all suffered huge loss.”*

(Interview: Pottery Maker 2, 2017)

#### Changing for Business Survival

Most pottery entrepreneurs at Koh Kret operated on a small scale. Presently, pottery products are no longer popular products, only some items such as flower pots or soup bowls can sell. In addition, highly competitive marketing from the same group of entrepreneurs or various substitute products have forced the pottery entrepreneurs to change business tactics just like the saying, *“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”* And for small business entrepreneurs, things can't get much tougher. Only a small number of potters at Koh Kret remain in business by adapting to the surrounding in the following areas:

##### 1. Goods Production based on Consumer Demand

1.1 When the demand for goods in a business is based on consumer demand for what is produced, the pottery entrepreneur is turning to produce small goods such as flower pots and soup bowls because consumers and restaurants still demand such items as told by participants during the interview:

*“We must focus on producing the best marketable products such as small souvenirs or pots and jugs”*

(Interview, Pottery Entrepreneur3, 2017)

1.2 Produce more elegant merchandise such as ornaments and souvenirs since pottery products are no longer a human necessity. When more consumers preferred products with an elaborate design, the potter has focused more on attractive merchandise as told by one of the participants:

*“Now, we are producing mainly on sellable products such as coffee cup, vase and small souvenir.”*

(Interview, Pottery Entrepreneur 2, 2017)

##### 2. Becoming the Learning Center

In order to preserve indigenous knowledge that has been passed to younger generations of Koh Kret for over 100 years, a group of skilled handicraft, a workshop, including pottery making classes have been formed as told by one of the potters:

*“We are trying to make our community more sustainable through preserving indigenous knowledge. We focus more on preserving community knowledge than making income. In addition, this place had been turned into Knowledge Center. One time we had roughly 100 visitors who had not bought even a*

*single merchandise, but they spent money on food and drinking water and tour the area. At least, the locals made extra income on selling foods."*

(Interview, Pottery Maker 1, 2017)

### 3. Business Attraction

To attract customers, the entrepreneurs have displayed pottery products together with a variety of products, which are also essential for the locals' survival. In the entrepreneurial perspective, displayed pottery is not only inheriting local wisdom on pottery, but also benefiting other products as well as driving a local economy as one participant mentioned in his statement:

*"We are focusing more on sustainable community and how to pass on local knowledge. We do not emphasize on making money, instead we prefer to educate the locals and make this community as the Educational Center. Once, we had almost 100 visitors for a field trip and site tour. They did not buy any pottery products, but rather spent money on foods and drinking water. At least, the locals made some money."*

(Interview, Pottery Maker 1, 2017)

### 4. New Management

Under the new management concept, the pottery entrepreneurs have arranged advertising their own merchandises through different channel of distributions for public displays:

*"Only in the past 4 years, we have engaged online advertising such as selling products through Facebook just like most of my friends left their regular works and started their own business selling clothes or chili paste on Facebook. At first they are doing it like a hobby, soon it began to spread among relatives, friends and acquaintances, online business is now moving fast. We got curious, so we started to pay close attention and study the method. We have learned that with so many LIKES, when your Facebook has so many visitors and became popular, some sponsors would like to advertise their products on our Facebook and willing to pay for the space. We have tried and found that it is so much fun and we can do it in our spare time. When people started to notice our Facebook, we took it seriously. It gives us great feeling and wanting to do better until we were invited to TV interview because the public saw our Facebook."*

(Interview, Pottery Entrepreneur 1, 2017)

4.1 Generating income from teaching interested tourists wanting to learn how to make pottery as told by one participant:

*"We have turned our community into the Learning Center for the tourist learning how to make pottery from the local potter. We also sold pottery clay 50 baht each."*

(Interview, Pottery Maker 1, 2017)

## Discussion

From the previous section, we have learned about problems and reasons for those involved in pottery business at Koh Kret modified their tactics to cope with the business turbulence. Therefore, in this section, the researchers will explore the consequences of such decisions.

1. Change occurred in production cost from rising energy costs to unexpected fluctuations in raw material price levels together with many supplies such as clay and firewood are becoming harder to secure. Because these raw materials are depleted or no longer available locally, the pottery entrepreneurs must import raw materials from outside Koh Kret, which in turn pushing the pottery product price higher. Quite often, they have either to absorb additional costs or pass price increases along to customers. Many pottery entrepreneurs have switched to using a gas stove and electric stove, enabled them to control the stove temperature at a lower cost. Besides raw material cost, labor costs have also surged as part of an overall, extended production cost cycle. Today, pottery entrepreneurs at Koh Kret are not facing only high production cost, depleted raw materials and narrowed down market, but also intense competition from substitute products and customers who are reluctant to spend. This concept is supported by the work of Yodchim et al. (2015) who recommended pottery entrepreneurs to improve pottery designs, more elegant and sophisticate to match the lifestyle of new generation.

2. Change in economic structure whereby product prices slowly rise throughout all sectors in an economy, effectively reducing the consumer purchasing power and thus consumers are more selective when buying nonfood items. Besides, many pottery products produced outside Koh Kret are selling at a much cheaper price. The intensity of rivalry among competitors is where Koh Kret pottery entrepreneurs facing pressure from another and limit their profit potential even though they have modified and improved their products. Moreover, consumers' preferences adapt along with technological advancement and financial situation.

3. Changing pottery products design based on consumers' preference and demand by focusing on the most sellable item. New product design is needed to meet rapidly changing technology and customer demands and increase enterprise flexibility. More specifically, it is the nature of competition that the entrepreneur will strive for advantage over their rivals. Therefore, product design is the means by which customer demand for new and varied products can be met. To date, Koh Kret pottery entrepreneurs produce smaller items such as flower pots and soup bowls because they are still in demand. Besides changing design, the potter entrepreneurs focused on making elegant products that serve many purposes such as ornaments and souvenirs.

4. Changing management strategy by turning Koh Kret into the Learning Center besides manufacturing pottery so that the local knowledge in pottery over 100 years can be inherited by the younger generation. To serve the purpose, a group of skilled craftsman is established and enabled to maintain Koh Kret tradition as well as provide specific sites and classrooms for job training and pottery making.

5. The exhibition of pottery and related products at Koh Kret is another effective approach to boost the local economy as well as generate more income for the locals, which their livelihoods depend on it besides passing on indigenous knowledge.

6. The pottery entrepreneurs have engaged the Media Distribution Channels to boost product sale as well and approached more consumers through:

- Television Interview
- Product Exhibition outside Koh Kret
- Product displayed through Internet

7. Setting up the pottery classes for the tourists and interested persons to learn is another way to generate income. This concept is coincided with the work of Boonthum (2013) who recommended the direction for pottery development by altering management style, focusing on product design and uniqueness as well as collaborate with all sectors to sustain development in pottery business.

Product design is more important than ever because customers are demanding greater product varieties and are switching more quickly to products that satisfied their needs.

### 5.1 Surviving Business Downturn

A business downturn is a general slowdown in product selling activity over a sustained period of time. In order for Koh Kret entrepreneurs to survive business downturn, the authors have recommended few areas of business improvements from compilation of numerous field works:

1. Changing internal structure to endure environmental impact which is supported by the work of Jamjun and Boonyamanon (2013) who identified procedures and approaches to "enhance community capital", enabled to create value-added commodity in which becoming unique "identity" and a contributor to successful social development and sustainable community.

2. Keep up with technological change since the use of social media has empowered communities to visualize aspirations and discover solutions to their development problems and issues. Sale of merchandises is done conveniently through social media with product information can be sent to customers online as well. With wider network and various channel of distribution, the entrepreneurs who have done their business on line found himself the advantage over other sellers.

3. Focus on marketing and social responsibility where the entrepreneur should not solely focus on maximizing profits, instead he has a duty to act in the best interests of the environments and society as a whole. A successful entrepreneur must possess good marketing knowledge simply because marketing has changed so much in the last decade as well as adapting acquired knowledge to his own

business as told by Nakrit (2017) on customer-centered marketing concept whereby a business is focusing on a client needs and satisfaction as the major priorities.

4. Turning pottery business into Cultural Tourism in order to promote unique Thai tradition and identity through hospitality. This concept is supported by the work of Jittungwattana(2006) on the promotion of Thai cultural tourism through historical evidence, archeology and museum, traditional architecture, art, handicraft, sculpture, painting, sculpture and carving, religious ceremonies, music, plays and movies, languages and literature, lifestyle, clothes and cuisine, customs, tradition, festivity and job description, technology and indigenous knowledge. Jamjun and Boonyamanon (2013) also mentioned the process to seek “Working Capital” available within the community for value added representing unique “Identity” to reflect true community character, leading to successful and sustainable social development.

5. Transferring knowledge to family and community is to strengthening, connecting and developing strategy for transferring knowledge and services into the local communities so they can practice traditional lifestyle and maintain culture within the community. Nonetheless, not all communities are able to preserve indigenous knowledge (Jukpisut, 2004). Moreover, knowledge transfer in pottery making in Koh Kret is not as sustainable as it should be. Boonthum (2013) recommended entrepreneurs to improve product design and make products focusing on local wisdom by arranging merchandises in pairs with story-telling. Moreover, Pattanapanithipong et al. (2016) mentioned the unique community lifestyle bonding with community background and the pottery development, including the local ritual associated with pottery making. It was found that knowledge transfer involved with the surrounding, experience, learning, knowledge, wisdom, love, searching, courage and patience, creativity and conscious.

6. Building Brand Loyalty through brand community commitment, consumer trust, and standard production, especially brand community commitment was seen to have a stronger effect than on word-of-mouth.

## 5. Conclusion

An economic downturn is a general slowdown in economic activity over a sustained period of time. Surviving an economic downturn can be a challenging for pottery entrepreneurs. Although an entrepreneur may not be able to completely protect his business from a business downturn, understanding how it could affect his business will help him develop a plan to minimize its impact. He may also be able to identify new business opportunities as well. Pottery entrepreneurs must be ready and willing to adjust to the situation at more frequent intervals. A starting point is to define and understand the company’s marketplace, customer needs and competition. Based on this assessment, the company’s primary competitive dimensions can be selected and a strategy defined to develop and enhance these competitive dimensions. Once this is done, product and process design can be oriented to implement the strategy. Planning, reviewing and monitoring the business should give entrepreneur the information he needs to make changes to help him stay financially viable. Also, identify the strengths that have enabled the success to date, and those that will be important in future operation.

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