

Abstract

This is a study of a group of cabinet-makers, using the concepts of practice and community of practice to show craft knowledge is learned and how craft people formulate their identity or identities. It proposes that the learning and transmission of cabinet-making knowledge and skill are inseparable from the socio-cultural relationship among craftsmen and apprentices in a workplace.

The cabinet-makers under study are employed by a furniture factory in the suburb of Bangkok. They make use of traditional tools and skills, as well as modern machines. The study describes the categories of cabinet-makers in the factory – master cabinet makers, apprentices, employees and many different sets of terminology used in describing relationships. It illustrates how a learner acquires knowledge and skill by practicing and participating in the process of manufacturing, as well as how some skills need to be embodied.

Cabinet-makers in Thailand often refer to the legendary Shanghai craftsmen as a model of quality. The study shows that contemporary cabinet-makers relate themselves to the Shanghai school in diverse ways. Some adopt the Shanghai identity, some reject it as a myth, others craft their own selves by identifying with the name of the factory, or their personal economic success. These multiple identities are formulated in the context of each individual biography and circumstances of employment.