

# Innovation Meets Localism: An Exploratory Study on Design Strategy Towards Cultural Sustainability

Xue Pei

**Abstract**—Innovation with the consideration of local identity strengthens the similarities and differences between different cultures, communities and individuals. The resilience within the system is needed. In this paper, the study of the role of design strategy is balancing innovation and localism when sustainable solutions are necessary within cultural issues. The data collection during the research is structured in two steps: the first step is to build the literature data to theoretically exploration between design strategy, related to new products, services and branding, and cultural sustainability in social innovation. Afterwards, I will present two typical cases which focus on illustrating how strategic design facilitate the process of coming up with sustainable solutions in the context of cosmopolitan localism. In these two cases, practical solutions driven by design are sharing reflections and experiences of innovatively solving certain common problems through balancing two aspects of cultural sustainability. Finally the paper exemplifies and highlights the necessary of “strategic design” approach, which might represent and expend the mindset and perspective of understanding and solving cultural issues from an emerging process, in contemporary society.

**Keywords**—Design strategy, cultural sustainability, cosmopolitan localism, design-driven innovation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

As the globalization and manufacture are increasingly affecting the world, which is becoming much “smaller” than before, we are encountering kind of the same crisis no matter where and who we are. While we are taking actions to solve these problems, however, sustainable solutions with considerations on culture and identities based on territories, which are more or less ignored in the past, are becoming of huge importance in contemporary development. There is ongoing debate about the need to include the cultural dimension as a part of sustainable development. Within the whole framework of the sustainable development, the role of cultural sustainability is still vague among quite a number of domains, both theoretical and practical. This is where different opinions and disciplines are able to find the new interpretation from their point of views. Of course, not all of them have to be developed by designers, but, for sure, many of them require some specific design knowledge [1]. The practice of design may have the ability to become a critical aspect of establishing a sustainable condition, considering other aspects: the history, history, tradition, and identity of culture [2]. Through this process, there might be better defined and visualized local identities, which are resilient and

dynamic, with global innovation impact.

Based on exploring the role of design strategy in fostering the cultural aspect of society development and transforming the process towards sustainability, this paper is to study the relationship and active effects of innovative design strategy on local-based cultural sustainability, a component of social sustainable development. By re-thinking, re-defining and deeply looking into theoretical and practical areas, it will be much clearer to explore how design is able to meet the new and essential needs of cultural sustainability.

## II. DESIGN FOR CULTURE SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is known as an emerging competitive aspect for organizations in environmental and economic domains for balancing the reduction of bad impacts and improvement of benefits towards a promising scenario in the future. At the same time, the mindset of sustainability about social, even more specifically about the culture, is becoming attracting attentions from different perspectives, and moving from physical and tangible resources to spiritual and intangible experiences, including the behavior, lifestyle, relationships of communities and individuals.

Cultural sustainability is a new interdisciplinary approach, which aims at raising the significance of culture and its factors in local, regional and global sustainable development. The need to increase understanding and methodological development related to social and cultural values in planning are explicitly emphasized in the European Landscape Convention [3]. As always considered that culture is an increasingly crucial aspect for sustainable development, as it represents the awareness and responsibility of people on identifying, maintaining, generating and applying cultural factors to come up with an special and unique perspective, as well as a kind of vision. The modern society seems to be in a framework of multi-local society, a network of interconnected communities and places, at the same time, open and localized [4], in which new definitions and interpretations of “global” and “local” are needed. These two aspects cannot be ignored and should always be considered at the same time and the same level.

Design, as usual, is increasingly treated as an effective and promising approach to look and think about social issues, cultural issues also included. From Herbert Simon’s perspective [5], “design is devising courses of action aimed at changing current situations into preferred ones”. And in recent society and context, the “preferred ones” are highly related to cultural sustainability. Alternatively, to arrive the preferred ones, there are definitely different thinking processes and approaches, but the common objective is for communication. In this sense, design is a way of life and all

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others around our lives and us, and it makes things better [6]. Design is mainly located in “communication”, where designers are dealing with not only the objects, service, experiences themselves, but also the all that around these main elements, taking actions to express or to facilitate others to express their attitudes, opinions and finally reach desirable results. Thus, designers and people with certain design knowledge are able to contribute the elaboration of innovative and better solutions and frameworks [2] to solve problems, or it can be said that they are more sensitive to detect the needs to change, and they have a better perspective to look into the possible trends. Finally, they are more capable to communicate and realize these solutions into reality in accordance with modern social and culture contexts, or even more to promote a new culture for living and acting, which is considered to be more sustainable.

With the objectives and capabilities, design, especially strategic design, is able to take actions from two approaches to face and cater the cultural sustainability requires: on one hand, strategic design has advantages in catalyzing and fostering the innovative processes on cultural sustainability from a global perspective, which provides a shared vision between different regions, communities and individuals, and provides possibilities to communicate and exchange; design strategies, on the other hand, is an effective way to detect the related elements of local identities, afterwards to analyze, synthesize and make sense of them based on the perception and traditions of local communities and individuals, as well as the territory-contexts. These two aspects should be carried on simultaneously and concordantly, thus, this is what is highlighted as one characteristic of design strategy for promoting the ways and processes of cultural sustainability through a delicate and mutual restraint balance.

### III. NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION AND LOCALIZATION

According to the third innovative wave, which challenged the mainstream of globalized production and consumption system. Globally distributed system provides trends and possibilities to be open and, where design strategy can conduce to promote the interactions between different territories, open to the interaction with wider flows of people, who bring together with their ideas, that characterize contemporary global society [7]. And this interactive scenario is always where innovation appears by learning and reflecting on certain problems based on open relationships. In this dynamic process, culture goes through one to another; different cultural elements are affecting and growing at the same time. On one hand, when dealing with similar problems, like food, transportation, housing, aging, through looking into other culture contexts and how others' solution for solving similar problems and sharing opinions among different cultures are always beneficial to come up with the best solutions, not only because we know how to get the best solution, but also because we obtain sufficient and different experiences during the process for solving these problems together with others. On the other hand, when facing the totally different problems, there are useful inspirations and suggestions, which worth learning, sharing and discussion, as well.

Manzini states in the online platform SEP (sustainable everyday project) that by the expression ‘local’ what is meant now is something very removed from what was understood in the past (i.e. the valley, the village, the small provincial town, all isolated and relatively closed within their own culture and economy). Compared with the “traditional” meanings of these two words, new situations and contexts reflect new relationship between the two words, meaning both antithetic and coherent. A distributed production and consumption system where the global is a “network of locals” [8], the new understanding of “local” includes all the specific characteristics of a territory and the communities and individuals with the new phenomena based on connected “global” and interconnected culture. The new form of “local” is not completely independent; oppositely, new interpretation of localization should focus on defining the combined network of different but related “local”s.

The dynamic and delicate relationship between global and local is named by certain scholars as a kind of cosmopolitan localism [9], [10], being an outcome of a particular condition featured by the delicate balance between being localized and open to innovate and connect to global flows of ideas, information, people, things and money [11] as well. The characteristics of cosmopolitan localism are seen as a creative balance between being rooted in a given place and community and being open to global flows of ideas, information, people, things and money [12]. Nevertheless, this creative balance can be promoted in some ways, and be destroyed as well. If the innovative process of globalization takes more important role, which probably leads to be totally open, it will result in losing the locally specific features and identities. Being as the same as what happens in anywhere in the world is not the real purpose of innovation process. On the other hand, if the limitation and persistence of local traditions are over highlighted making the innovative process more closed and independent will result in losing the innovative opportunities and disruptive possibilities in exploring better solutions for local development. Thus, if this delicate balance is well balanced, executed and achieved, it's able to create a network, within which there are no isolate entities but interrelated. The cosmopolitan localism regenerate new identity for specific places, where all the solutions are combining both typical local identities and shared vision.

A new definition and interpretation about the relationship about globalization and localism from the perspective of cultural innovation are needed, where design knowledge and strategies are especially able to contribute.

### IV. STRATEGIC DESIGN DRIVEN COSMOPOLITAN LOCALISM

Replying to the development of awareness and responsibility in better defining the concept of cosmopolitan localism and making it understandable in a large scale by more individuals, design is capable to transform it into a visual language for communication. Design has increasingly been recognized as a strategic resource (design has transformed from product styling to service experience and till the strategic consulting) for a large number of companies, recently, its strategic ability is increasingly considered as an important approach for realizing culture sustainability in

social issues and impacts, being more specific in this paper, for cosmopolitan localism. How design is able to drive, lead and facilitate the process of coming up with solutions based on cosmopolitan localism can be synthesis with two aspects.

In the academic theory, there are mainly three ways to promote the process of innovation: technology-driven, market-driven and design-driven. When considering the innovation in the cultural sustainability, focusing on the new trend of cosmopolitan localism, the design driven approach, compared with the other two, will be a better choice, because of its essential capability of brokering and visualizing the culture value deep from the contexts, local communities and individuals. Design-driven innovation approach expands and elaborates the concept of form and communication through the language and meaning it conveys [13]. This definition is able to broaden more as: design-driven approach express the hidden meaning reflected by culture, especially the modern trend-cosmopolitan localism, not only by the physical forms of products, but also intangible service experience, business model and so on and how to communicate and visualize these cultural reflections as well. In general, the outcome, which strategic design can bring, is mostly a sustainable solution that aims to facilitate users to achieve a result consistent with the criteria of culture sustainability [8]. The design driven approach have more advantages on synthesizing complex influences and communicating them by different forms. Alternately, different design strategies can also efficiently involve people into participatory design processes, during which designers act as an activator to facilitate the local communities and active citizens, who actually own and deeply influenced by the local culture, to do something innovatively from a global perspective.

The fairly delicate balance within cosmopolitan localism (formed by global innovation and local reflection) needs to be considered paralleling about the two sides. The capability of strategic design in balancing the tension between exploration and exploitation [14] within a number of corporations is treated as useful approach for managing innovation process. Comparing the delicate relationship of global innovation and local reflection with that of exploration and exploitation, it's possible to strength strategic design in realizing and communicating the good effects and social influence of cosmopolitan localism, where the dynamic balance is essential. Thus the strategic design explores more possibilities to find more innovative solutions from the globally open and connected network, and at the same time to exploit the deeply local-based cultural contexts to better serve local communities and individuals, and further, to reflects to the global network as well. These are all the contributions design strategies are able to provide.

## V. RESEARCH EXAMPLES

Strategic design, with the capability of mediating and balancing theories from multidiscipline, can help to generate solutions, which are not only innovative, but also reassembling all the elements into a better way with the consideration of global and local identities and contexts. There are many innovative solutions and successful cases all over the world. Based on the collected literature research data above, future analysis will move to study the specific

examples, which are chosen for better understanding the capability of design strategy in contributing to cosmopolitan localism, the new expression of cultural sustainability. Two typical cases, which are closely related to offer useful outcomes and insights for study, were chosen in this research: (1) SHOKAY--- a social enterprise, focusing on providing high quality hand knitting products based on the yak from Tibet and improving local living conditions at the same time, as well as, including collaboration, design and research programs. (2) Chinese Country Fair --- local community supported agriculture activities, which tries to build new food bridges and network for local farmers and citizens based on the context of cities, like Beijing and Shanghai. These two examples are coming from different areas, and focusing on totally different topics: sustainable fashion social enterprise and local farmer market, including a huge scale of design domains: product design, service design, business model design, branding, experience design. When detected from the point of view of cosmopolitan localism, however, essentially, they have a lot in common.

### A. SHOKAY

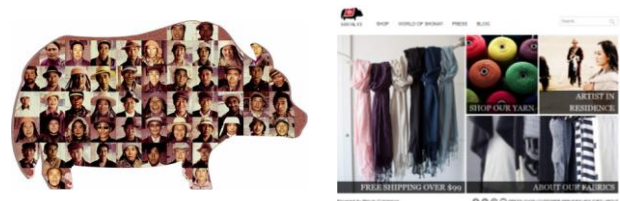


Fig. 1. Communicating SHOKAY's sustainable solutions, Source: SHOKAY homepage (2013).

SHOKAY, means Yak in Tibetan, is an international scaled social enterprise and the first dedicated luxury yak brand. It aims at creating luxury fashion brand with social and cultural responsibilities. The concept of SHOKAY comes from the consideration and research of "trying to understand issues of poverty, and how [they] could apply sustainable solutions to the Chinese context" [15]. SHOKAY derives its origins from the mountainous Himalayan regions of western China, and directly gets the resource, which is of hand-combed by the local Yak herders, from Tibet communities in Qinghai province to make sure the quality. The outstanding points of SHOKAY [16] is to revolute and optimize the yak industry, they maintain the high quality of combing, cleaning and sorting the fiber through respecting the traditional and local skills of local communities (Yak herders), and they spread the fantastic sources and skills by providing high quality and well designed products and services to global market, in this way, the living condition of local communities is highly improved, compared with before, and at meantime, SHOKAY ensure the potential opportunities of cultural sustainability in Tibet in the future.

SHOKAY's strategy of involving design in the whole industrial innovation process is typical design-driven approach for implementing culture sustainability in reality. In SHOKAY 's whole system (solution), they are firstly focusing on providing the yak down products, which spread the hidden cultural meaning and quality through designing the semiotic outlook. Design language is considered as the driven factor for presenting the meaning which, in some ways, is easy to be forgotten or ignored because the markets and

consumers often have little knowledge, which should be and can be exaggerated by design and design strategies. As a result, while the products spreading in global market, the local cultural identity will be surely recognized all over the world, meanwhile, the global markets are also able to generate some feedback. In SHOKAY, they provide an open platform where local and traditional skills meets the innovative designers and strategies, where design can help local communities, who are the culture owners but without design knowledge, to tell their story and their perspective of what the products should be like. Besides, SHOKAY also has worldwide-connected design platform. In these multi-approaches design and strategies are properly combining global innovation and local knowledge through performing both products and services to realize cosmopolitan localism.

Simultaneously, the balancing capability of design strategy is helping SHOKAY to develop towards cultural sustainability. The On-going training program is another design-driven strategy for cosmopolitan localism, which is promoted increasingly nowadays. For example, the collected innovative concepts from global cooperative programs come up with new needs and skills for combing yak fibers, or even knitting, in order to form complicated patterns and get high quality and unique products, which also bring back higher return to local communities [17]. The delicate balance between maintaining local traditions and innovatively adapting to global markets and consumers' needs is significant for SHOKAY's future development in the trend of cosmopolitan localism. The corporation's strategy now explores more possible model to operate and realize the original mission and objective in different and changing markets, societies and cultures. For example, SHOKAY is also play the role of providers of SHOKAY yarns for some companies and cooperate with them, through collaborating process, SHOKAY can spread its own brand identity and traditional and high quality of Tibet resources and skills (going from local to global), on the other hand, SHOKAY also guide the cooperators by telling the inspiration stories, and by combining the stories with their international backgrounds as the concept for designing, SHOKAY comes up with outstanding products, which definitely win in the context of cosmopolitan localism, because of the capability of keeping the dynamic balance.

### *B. Chinese "Country" Fair*

The food security accidents are appearing on the newspapers almost everyday in China, where citizens are increasingly paying more attention, time and money on the food quality issue. Like some developed countries in North America and Europe, many active citizens and traditional farmers are taking actions to get contact with each other to form the new small scale and flexible exchange systems, which later becomes the country fair, or farmer market, farmers come to the appointed place in the urban area with fixed frequency (like once a week, always in the weekend), and this phenomena is an emerging social activities in many cities, especially in big cities in China, like Beijing and Shanghai, where citizens are much further away from the traditional and high quality food. In the market, good relationship is easy to be set up between farmer and citizens, which contributes to build the trust bridges during knowledge

exchange and food purchase process, which is fairly related to cultural sustainability. These is one way for promoting the community supported agriculture, which aims at reduce the distance between farmers and consumers, meaning reduce the time, money and effort waste within the whole process and meanwhile take the advantages of distributed system. The farmers' market is challenging the traditional food distribution system from producing to consuming, forming a new system to be open, connected and local.

In this new system and relationship between farmers and citizens, a design strategy driven approach can be useful for the communication about its products, services, experiences and brands based on the local cultural contexts. Firstly, designers have advantages to better understand the characteristics of the potential customers and are able to provide certain strategies to visualize the communication style. And since in this case, most important part of the outcome of the country fair service are intangible experience, design strategic also moving the traditional products semiotic language to express the meaning hidden in the process and touchpoints of services, like the poster, website, customer journeys. When are visualized, these elements are needed to be considered both innovatively and locally, using the innovative language to highlight the innovative part and trend influenced by the global culture and also utilizing the local features to attract and cater local customers. Besides, because the sensitive ability to catch the emerging trend in local contexts, they choose the most promising social media (Weibo) in China at that time, later, this is proven to be one of the best approaches to reach the right customers and the best platform for information communication between different stakeholders. Design, strategy design, in this way, strengthens the capability to form the new image of country fair towards cultural sustainability.



Fig. 2. Farmer market in Beijing and Milan, Source: <http://www.mercatidellaterra.it/>, <http://www.weibo.com/farmersmarketbj> (2014).

Comparing the Chinese farmers market with similar cases in the world, differences and similarities exist as a reply to the trend of cosmopolitan localism. As part of the global sustainable solutions for promoting local food production and consumption, Chinese country fair has the same mission and objective to promote the sustainable cultural and social behaviors no matter where this phenomena happens. On the other hand, there are specific differences in Chinese culture contexts even though it is dealing with the same problems form the same start point. And design strategies help to keep the balance between open and unique by properly connecting them together. In Chinese farmer market, the relationship is more interpersonal, most of consumers come because of the introduction form friends, even though they have already know about the fair some time ago. Strategic Designers know about this "special" relationship before they start to intervene. That's why they choose Weibo as the main and primary



social media to communicate before every week's activities. And on Weibo, people are mostly following and followed by their friends, besides, people also follows some famous people, whose words will affect their activities as well. From this detailed difference, it's easily to see the importance to balance the two parts of cosmopolitan localism, which can lead to succeed in realizing sustainable solutions in specific territory

## VI. CONCLUSION

The strategic nature of design can be formulate as a manager of dealing with multi-discipline issues, like branding, technology management, social innovation, as well as cultural sustainability. Design strategy, which has been considered for a long time as an efficient tool in business area, starts to present more impact on managing the decision making process as well, like what, why, how to do based on contemporary complicated society towards cultural sustainability. With the discussion and analysis deeply into typical cases, better illustration on the impacts of local, innovative, social actions driven by design strategy are obtained finally. The finding suggests that design strategy, with its inclusive capability on better understanding of culture, is not only a collection of tools for solving social problems and presenting innovative ideas, but also a better approach to re-thinking how to integrate and balance local resources and design-led innovations in order to generate initial solutions with consideration of local contexts, where people have new needs and intentions together with their traditional way of thinking and acting. The contributions of strategic design process to better achieve cultural sustainability are quit clear both in near future and long-term plans. By making the problems much easier to understand, explore and solve, strategic design will definitely influence the local-based sustainable solutions from much more ways and processes. The significant role of design strategy in forming new interpretation of cultural sustainability with regard to innovation and localism, and it also contributes to transformation and management for future related researches and applications.

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