

An Interview with Dr. Wan Noor Faaziah Wan Omar

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Exploring Cross-Cultural Connections Through Traditional Design

Art and music are frequently used as mediums of intercultural exchange, but for a group of students studying design in Malaysia, it was furniture making that has led to new perspectives—for their final projects at university and perhaps in their future careers.

Supported by the Toshiba International Foundation, the students and their teachers visited Japan in 2023 to learn more about traditional Japanese woodworking techniques. Dr. Wan Noor Faaziah Wan Omar is a faculty member in the Department of Industrial Design at the Kedah campus of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in Malaysia. She shares her reflections on the trip and tells Japan-Insights about how this experience has benefitted both staff and students.

Interview by Louise George Kittaka*



Dr. Wan Noor Faaziah Wan Omar accompanied the students on their field trip to Japan. Wan is a Senior Lecturer in the Industrial Design Department, College of Creative Arts at the Universiti Teknologi MARA's Kedah Campus.

A New Chance for Knowledge

UiTM is a public university consisting of one main campus and 34 satellite campuses. With more than 500 programs ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate level, UiTM is committed to excellence and innovation. The Kedah Branch specializes in arts, business and information studies, and is located in the northern part of Malaysia.



UiTM Kedah Campus, home of the Industrial Design Department, College of Creative Arts

UiTM Kedah's Bachelor and Diploma courses in Art and Design (Industrial Design Technology) incorporate transport design, product design and industrial design, with a curriculum that emphasizes both technical training and creative development. Students receive instruction in total design solutions, developing the skills they need to forge a career in the challenging and exciting world of industrial design.

An innovative final project was offered to students in the Applied Design 1 and 2 classes: They were required to create a piece of custom-made furniture that incorporated

a traditional Japanese craft called Moku-Zogan. This decorative technique involves carving grooves or holes into a wooden surface, followed by inlaying or embedding with materials like shells, stones, ivory and metals. Five of

the Applied Design class students joined the field trip to Japan to learn more about inlay techniques, while experiencing Japanese culture firsthand.

“The participants were senior students working on their final projects for their degrees, and they went through an interview. We wanted to ensure the trip would be successful, with participants who showed the right commitment,” explains Wan.

She says that the faculty were learning alongside the students. “We were not experts in this at all! We explored various inlay design techniques from other countries, including Japan. We also needed to understand the Japanese culture. This venture was a chance for students and teachers to learn together, while developing cross-cultural skills.”

Learning About Time-Honored Techniques

One of the highlights of the trip was a visit to the workshop of craftsman Masahiro Kudo, a specialist in Japanese wood joinery and owner of 910mokko Woodwork in Funabashi, Chiba. He is also associated with the Japan Woodcraft Association (JWA), a non-profit association based in U.K. which showcases traditional Japanese woodwork techniques. He began the session by sharing his work with the Malaysian university students, before demonstrating simple joinery-making and processing.



Students and teachers pay careful attention during a demonstration from Masahiro Kudo at his workshop.

other countries. On the other hand, incorporating techniques from abroad into Japanese crafts and creations can also lead to new innovations,” he says.

According to Wan, the students were “very excited” about visiting Kudo’s workshop. “They were introduced to traditional tools which they hadn’t known about before. They were very impressed when they saw how these tools were used, and to learn about the inlay techniques for wood. Moreover, the materials are very different, with some woods that we can’t get in Malaysia.”

The group also visited the Japan Folk Crafts Museum in Meguro, Tokyo, which is dedicated to the preservation of handcrafted art. “Through these experiences, we gained further appreciation for the complexity of Japanese craftsmanship. It sparked our creativity, which we could take back to our own projects,” says Wan.



Wan (far right) with members of her research team

“Although I also do machine-made wood joinery, I find there’s a charm in the hand-crafted process that machines can’t replicate. You have to learn the basics from scratch and then proceed to processing and application in a specific order. You start practicing with simple joinery and gradually move on to more complex ones, honing your skills step by step,” Kudo explains.

Kudo believes there is plenty of scope for imparting the appeal of Japanese craft techniques. “This can contribute to the creative approach in designs and techniques from

The Next Generation in Design Talent

The Malaysian students enjoyed an opportunity to interact with Japanese peers through a visit to Chiba University. “Our students mingled with the Chiba students and asked them about Japanese life and culture. One of our students speaks Japanese, and she helped everyone communicate. They also attended a session with one of the university design professors, in which they communicated mostly in English,” says Wan.

One of the participants was Nurul Najeeha Nordin, a recent graduate from the College of Creative Arts. Nordin is currently participating in a specialized program organized by the Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB), dedicated to industrial skills training and education in wood-based related industry. “From the traditional architecture to the traditional clothing, they were all beautiful, and it made me realize that our countries have so much similarity when it comes to design—everything has a purpose. It shifted my perspective in so many wonderful ways,” she says of her time in Japan.



Wan and the 10 students from the Industrial Design Department, College of Creative Arts, who were involved in the Moku-Zogan project.



Nurul Najeeha Nordin and her furniture prototype



“Learning about design and craft techniques from other countries is incredibly beneficial because each nation brings its own unique approach to creation and construction,” says Nordin, who aspires to a professional role that offers lasting relationships with clients and chances for continual growth.

Nordin’s classmate Muhammad Dzarif also relished the chance to come to Japan and learn more about Japanese culture in terms of both visuals and practices. “Studying foreign craft techniques is helpful for designers as it expands their visual library and knowledge in creating culture-centered design. Knowledge about the visual aspects of design requires in-depth understanding of the cultural significance behind various types of crafts,” he points out.

Dzarif, who currently works as a furniture designer, hopes to eventually pursue a career in design education and to inspire others. “Using my knowledge, I will be teaching my future students about all aspects of design, ensuring they will be the new generations of capable designers and potential trailblazers. The design world is underrated and misunderstood, and I’m hoping to change that worldview one day.”



Muhammad Dzarif and his furniture prototype

Blending Cultures Through Design

Upon return to Malaysia, the students worked on furniture that blends Japanese and Malaysian design elements, applying the knowledge gained in Japan to their designs. They were required to demonstrate their individuality through their designs, while also taking current trends and users' needs into account. As young design entrepreneurs of the future, the challenge for the students was to come up with an optimal design concept and then to identify and overcome any problems they encountered during the execution.

Wan says it was important to achieve balance between the two cultures, as well as between design and aesthetics. "Like Japan, Malaysia has a rich and diverse heritage, so the two cultures are similar in this way. Students were bringing both modern and traditional cross-cultural innovation to their designs. They were seeking to combine the techniques from Japan and the motifs from Malaysia, respecting a blend of the two countries."



Students' furniture exhibited at UiTM Kedah Campus library

The students have gone on to exhibit their furniture at design shows and galleries, with various people showing interest in the inlay techniques and the tradition of Moku-Zogan. One of the events in which they participated was the Mindareka, a design show involving all programs in the College of Creative Arts, UiTM Kedah Branch. Professor Dr. Shahrman Zainal Abidin, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Internationalization (UiTM Global), officiated the event, which was held at UiTM Kedah Branch. As the Moku-Zogan project was chiefly an exercise in craftsmanship

and one-off design, the students needed guidance in terms of researching the commercial side of furniture design. Their pieces were assessed for marketability by the Tanggam Design Center, which offered the students valuable feedback on the suitability of their designs for consumers.

The students have now graduated and are taking the first steps in their careers or have gone on to further studies. Wan expresses the hope that they will be able to apply their experiences in Japan going forward. "We don't want them to be simply designers; we want them be exposed to diverse experiences from the global community."

In a wider sense, Wan also thinks this kind of cross-cultural design experience can be a way to deepen ties between Japan and Malaysia. “As a topic, design has universal appeal and can be appreciated by people from different backgrounds. We can explore and celebrate differences and add a human face to cultural experiences, and in turn, this can lead to empathy and mutual respect,” she points out.

Building on the success of this visit, Wan recently arrived in Japan for a sabbatical at Chiba University, where she will continue her research on cross-cultural design. She also expressed the desire for further visits by students from Malaysia. “This opportunity would not have been possible without the support of the Toshiba International Foundation. We hope to have future chances for our students to come to Japan again,” she says.



* Writer’s Profile: Louise George Kittaka

Louise is a Tokyo-based bilingual writer from New Zealand who contributes to a wide range of domestic and international media platforms. Her areas of interest include travel, popular culture, education, business, and issues pertaining to Japan’s international community. She conducts cross-cultural training programs for families leaving or arriving in Japan on corporate assignments and lectures in the comparative studies department at Shirayuri Women’s University. Louise is a graduate of Waikato University (New Zealand) and the State University of New York at Buffalo (USA).

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