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Post-Colonial Organizational Learning for Internationalization: A Case Study on Malaysian Family Business Selangor Pewter Co. (1965–1980)

Yen Nie Yong *

Abstract

Through the case study of Selangor Pewter Co. for the years 1965–1980, this paper analyzes how a family business in pewter manufacturing established pathways to internationalization through craft-based products. In the absence of the institutional environment that has yet to be developed in the home country, the company created for itself a cluster of networks of designers, jewelers, pewter makers, retailers, and distributors that provided know-hows on product design from other product categories such as jewelry. This enabled the company to respond to design theft and copying, dynamic changes in market demands and create new uses and meaning for pewter for international markets. The family business also used internationalization strategies to protect its ownership from outsiders, demonstrating the diverse uses of internationalization beyond company expansion.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; organizational learning; medium-sized family business; Malaysia; post-colonial industrialization

JEL Classifications: L26, L69, M31, M37; N85

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1. Introduction

Organizational learning for internationalization has often been studied as a phenomenon within and among large business groups, especially in the context of industrialized nations, but is less observed within a medium-sized family firm in a developing economy. It entrenches the assumption that medium-sized family firms in developing economies are in the periphery in the historiography of internationalization.

This paper analyzes how medium-sized companies, in the absence of a dynamic institutional environment in a developing economy, learns how to internationalize. Using the case study of Selangor Pewter Co.—a family firm specializing in manufacturing pewter tableware and gifts, this study reconstructs the young company’s learning processes on internationalization for the years 1965 to 1980. The period of study represents its first export market to Australia, partnerships with foreign pewter and jewelry companies and craftsmen, and formalization of the Design Department, all of which were foundational learning nodes of the company. The urgency to expand its export market is situated within a context of Malaysia’s dynamic shift in national priorities to redistribute wealth and capital ownership and create an indigenous entrepreneurial class after 1970. As such, Selangor Pewter’s family also sought novel ways to safeguard its ownership and control by reconstructing and socializing to the market the company’s historical narrative, and commissioning international designers to elevate its brand status.

Since its establishment in 1885 in the tin-rich state of Selangor—then part of a British colony, Selangor Pewter has remained a family business of Chinese ethnicity. It has operated throughout the colonization of Malaya by the British, two World Wars, Malaya’s Independence from the British, as well as Malaysia’s transformation into an industrializing economy in the post-colonial era. During the colonial era, except for few large European enterprises, most of the industrial activity in Malaya and Singapore was undertaken at a small scale by Chinese entrepreneurs. The family business model thrived in this setting as most firms in Malaya had less than 10 employees and “nearly 40%, and in Singapore more than 10%, of the “industrial” labor force consists, not of wage earners, but of own-account workers and unpaid family helpers” (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, p. 422). As with the capital ownership, acquisition of industrial skills too, were predominantly through apprenticeship either from craftsman to family member, or from family member to another family member.

Such knowledge transfer mode is inherently limiting, and forces family members to seek

learning opportunities outside the company, both formally and informally and often, through collaborations and networks with creative talents built over time. The collective effort of family members in learning is key to why the company (renamed Royal Selangor International Sdn. Bhd. in 1992) is a “hidden champion”¹ that remains a specialist in pewter—an alloy made of tin—today. It is not only the world’s largest pewter manufacturer, but also a leading brand in the gifts industry, underpinned by an illustrious list of product licensing partnerships with Disney, the Tolkien Estate, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the British Museum since 1997, a business segment which it has developed before toymaker group LEGO started similar business ventures (Kane, 2019). Today, Royal Selangor’s products—ranging from tableware, collectible figurines to jewelry—are sold in over 20 countries through stores it owns and online. It is currently managed by the third and fourth generation of family members.

In broad terms, this is a study of how medium-sized firms in former colonies internationalize. The case study of Selangor Pewter demonstrates that while it is true that companies create or expand into new markets for profitability, it is also true but less articulated that companies do so because they want to learn. During the 1960s, the company was the first original design and brand manufacturer for exports, a rarity among young companies in new industrializing economies in the post-colonial era that usually learnt by manufacturing semi-finished components for foreign multinational corporations. I argue that organizations’ learning experiences are key entrepreneurial processes that determine why some companies diversify while others, specialize. Selangor Pewter’s Design Department was instrumental in re-narrating the company’s history which in turn, led to the re-creation of a strong brand identity. The department also shaped the company’s collective identity as a legitimate arbiter of taste and quality at a time when few understood the language and concept of design. As the company’s history was internalized and socialized as a brand identity in the late 1970s, its managers sought new and wider applications of technology and design for its core business and branding in pewter. It also combined mass production and specialization as a strategy, rather than diversifying into non-related businesses to build size and scope.

This article draws from a range of sources from newspaper articles from the 1960s to the 1980s, and archival materials from company files and letters of correspondences obtained by the management of Royal Selangor. Oral history interviews with the third-generational owners and managers of Selangor Pewter/Royal Selangor, and the designers that the company hired during

¹ The hidden champion thesis is first mooted by Hermann Simon who used the term to describe small, specialized world market leaders from Germany. The criteria of a “hidden champion” are: it should achieve the top three global market position, or pole position in its continent; revenues should remain below US\$4 billion and it should have a relatively low public profile.

the period were also consulted as primary sources. It begins by describing the family's role in developing a design department, and its early functions. The second part explains how the design department created the company's collective identity using design and historical narratives, and how the company learnt to harness the value of business longevity to differentiate itself from its rivals through auction sales. The third part of the paper explains why Selangor Pewter had the urgency to internationalize and how it sought opportunities to legitimize that identity by commissioning renowned industrial designers to elevate the status of pewter. The conclusion brings in wider implications of Selangor Pewter's influence in guiding consumer taste in design, and its new growth trajectories in product licensing partnerships with foreign institutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Organizational Learning and Entrepreneurship

Firms are not self-contained but are perpetually engage with the external environment in managing resources and dependency (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). According to Zaheer (1995), how companies learn to internationalize is a key entrepreneurial process to gradually overcome the "liability of foreignness" stemming from uncertainties, absence of knowledge on the new export market (p.341). In the field of management studies, there is no shortage of literature on firms' internationalization (Hymer, 1976, 1960; Guillén, 2002). Perspectives from organizational studies such as Senge (1990) and Choo (1998) are instructive as they shed light on knowledge as a core resource of the firm. Tsoukas (2005), and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) demonstrated how a systematically codified knowledge in firms could determine firm growth. Yet, theorizing organizational learning and knowledge management in organizations presuppose that firms stick to rigid patterns of organizational learning. The richness and complexity of organizations' adaptive responses to changing environments, however, remain under-explored. Case studies on organizational learning can inform us how historical actors in organizations viewed and responded to problems, what Fear (2014) described as "the process in-between, rather than a snapshot of before and after" (p.171). Organizational learning is simply not static, and requires time to learn and unlearn as part of the process.

Companies exercise their creativity by exploring possibilities, but these processes are largely internalized by managers. Ocasio (1997) observed that organizational decisions are shaped through knowledge accumulation that are socially constructed through organizational attention and memory (p.171). Yet, attention and memories are also social constructs, and historical

actors have agency over which to attend to. As Hansen (2012) rightly observes, for an organization to change, it must find ways of re-telling the story about itself (p.704). Actions of re-narrating the company's story shapes its history. Through the historical study in Danish Savings Banks, Hansen (2012) demonstrated that historical narratives represent the past through the contemporary lens of the company managers. The company's history is in fact, a collection of self-reflections viewed, understood, and interpreted from various angles across different spectrums of time and space. Suddaby, Foster, and Trank (2010) have built a theoretical model on how rhetorical history could be used as a source of competitive advantage, but the scholars acknowledged that more empirical enquiry is required (p.168).

How then do researchers make the obscure, internalized and ever-evolving self-understanding of a company visible and tangible? One way is to analyze the learning experiences of companies as they tell more than the distinction between "exploitation" of existing capabilities and "exploration" of new ones, as March (1991) observed (pp. 72-73). They also determine the scope of specialization versus diversification for some firms, broadening the idea that specialist companies are more dynamic in diversifying applications of knowledge and technology. It challenges the notion that diversified business groups are always more resistant to external shocks and changes. Scholars have shown how large and diversified business groups have tended to utilize interorganizational learning through industrial districts, clusters and networks to gain new capabilities and mitigate uncertainty (Kraatz, 1998; Haunschild & Miner, 1997). As such, Guillén (2000) argues that the size and scope of the firm matters as membership in a business group gives a firm more exposure to other firms' learning experiences. This argument is problematic because it presupposes that inter-firm learning, which requires cooperation, is a given and a natural phenomenon.

Historical studies add nuance to the debate on the different pathways provided for business group learning versus medium-sized firm learning. Small and medium-sized firms in the crafts production industry are deemed as unimportant players to industrialization in any economy, but scholars like Lemerrier (2009) have shown that these views need qualification. In documenting the industrial history of jewelry makers of Birmingham in the twentieth century, Carnevali (2003) explained that the marginalization was mainly due to politicians' and policymakers' preference to nurture the growth of large-scale companies, such as banking and retail (pp. 272-73). Industrial structure in the post-war era, thus replicated that of the United States, and scholarly attention also turned to Chandlerian framework of companies which focused on size and scope. Such pattern of industrialization is also captured in former colonies that became late-industrializing economies in Southeast Asia from the 1960s.

2.2. Colonial Legacies in Malaysia’s Entrepreneurship Development

In Malaysia, the perception of the crafts industry as low-tech, labor-intensive with minimal capital input requirements had existed even during the colonial era. Efforts to promote traditional arts and crafts in British Malaya had focused on Malay crafts such as Malay silverwork in Kelantan and handloom weaving industry. Schauer (2017) argued that the crafts industry was a policy of ‘mitigated modernity’ to increase the local community’s earning power beyond the agricultural economy for subsistence (p. 496). Cheah (2013) argued that British intervention into Malay craft production had the undesirable effect of associating craft as “rural work” with low technology to preserve its heritage status. The disconnect between industrialization and design in state-building since the colonial era continued in the post-colonial era, as the Malaysian government encouraged SMEs on timber furniture exports to be Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) for foreign companies rather than be an Original Design Manufacturers (ODM) for the early but critical stages of industrialization.

Hence, the broad implication is that the quest to catch-up with industrialized economies meant that industrial narratives of developing economies were mainly on young companies’ ability (usually run by Chinese families) to transform from specialized firms into conglomerates—often into trade and commerce, heavy industries, banking, property development and construction sectors. The business conglomerates were also aided by patronage relations with the state that were mainly governed by indigenous leaders. It is no wonder that the role of small and medium-sized family businesses in the crafts industry or other smaller sectors that were also learning to grow were side-lined by policymakers, economists, and researchers. With such overview, this article presents reasons why we need more variety of case studies on how family firms operating in different institutional environments, regulatory regimes and cultural settings learn to internationalize.

3. The Family’s Role in Creating a Design Department

3.1. Selangor Pewter Before 1975

In 1885, Yong Koon Seong (1871–1952), a 14-year-old craftsman sailed from Shantou, China to Kuala Lumpur, Malaya to join his brothers to start a pewter enterprise making Chinese ceremonial vessels such as drinking vessels and teapots.² For each of the pewter item, the Yong

² All pewter items prior to 1950 contained 95% to 97% tin and 3% lead, as a bulking agent to soften

brothers would stamp on it the Chinese characters 玉和 (*Yu He*), which means Jade Peace in Mandarin or rather, *Ngeok Foh* in Hakka which was the name of the enterprise. On the left-hand side of the stamp, the words “Zu Xi” or pure tin in Mandarin, guaranteeing the quality of its pewter items. *Ngeok Foh* was among first few tinsmith enterprises in the British colony, which was becoming the world’s largest tin producer at the turn of the 20th century.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Chinese and European tin miners in Malaya supported the setup of a pewter industry to help absorb tin oversupply in the late 1920s and early 1930s (“Pewterware Industry”, 1932). The tin miners cited the example of the Yong family pewter enterprise as one with top-notch craftsmanship (“Salvation for Tin?”, 1930). With the influence of European tastes in pewter design and encouragement by tin miners, the family business switched from Chinese religious ceremonial vessels to making cigarette boxes, ashtrays and beer mugs for the European consumers living in Malaya, and was renamed Malayan Pewter. The British colonial administration even displayed some of the items at the Malaya House for sale in London (“Tin Propaganda Campaign”, 1932). These opportunities gave the pewter enterprise the first taste of manufacturing for a foreign market. However, the momentum lost traction with the arrival of the Second World War. After several attempts of reviving the family’s pewter business, Yong Peng Kai (1915–1990), the only member that continued the family business in pewter-making, made a fresh start through Selangor Pewter by learning how to modernize its operations.

In the early 1950s, Peng Kai introduced an assembly line, starting from the back of the building where flat pewter sheets were casted, a man’s job at that time. Female workers, some of whom were cousins to Soh Eng—Peng Kai’s wife—worked mainly as pewter polishers, craftspeople, and packers. It was considered a break away from the traditional role women had assumed during the era. He also recruited all his children and two nieces to work at the factory. All four Peng Kai’s children—sons Poh Shin (1939–) and Poh Kon (1945–), daughters Mun Ha (1941–) and Mun Kuen (1942–2019)—were actively involved in the management and were pivotal to the company’s expansion and internationalization in the later years. They were exposed to the family business at a young age. Poh Kon, the youngest son, was the only child that received tertiary education in mechanical engineering from the University of Adelaide. The older three siblings learnt the trade through networks they cultivated along the way. The children had not gone into the business willingly (Mun Ha Sun nee Yong, personal interview, January 7, 2020). The roles that the children took on were informally assigned whenever the need arose. To a

the metal so that it could be fashioned into shape more easily and increase the pewter’s durability.

large extent, they were also gender-specific. The sons were responsible for factory supervision and technical production, while the daughters started off with book-keeping and managing customers at the showroom. In the 1950s and 1960s, few local manufacturing companies had the opportunity of seeing first-hand the benefits of industrial design to its operations. A prototype of early industrial design training was through the International Labour Organization's technical expertise given to some local manufacturing companies, including Selangor Pewter. Industrial engineers Dr. A. Pukkila from Finland and P.G. Bradford from Britain, were instrumental in designing a new factory layout for the company.

A detailed explanation by Poh Kon is quoted at length here:

In those days, all of our little polishing machines were all in a line next to the wall. It was a very Dickensian image. We had a huge 40-horsepower motor which drove by a belt up to the ceiling, a big long, shaft with individual pulleys. Even to start the motor in the morning, we needed a star delta motor. It means when the motor is stationary, you need to wind the motor up in a special way that gives you very high torque in the beginning but very slowly. And then, when it achieved a certain speed, you throw down a toggle switch and it whirred, and that is how you would know the factory is running. The problem with that setup is that it became linear and you cannot move away from the rigidness. It is no longer good work study because everyone had to work in one row. When Mr. Bradford saw that, he designed a new polishing head, drawing it only by hand. To me, it was a beautiful work of art, which is just a spindle with different-sized pulleys that would go down to the table which has a slot cut to place the belt and underneath the table, was a Singer sewing machine motor with an adjustable pedal which controlled the speed. Not only we now had an individual speed control of a polishing lathe, but it is silent, quieter than a sewing machine because it didn't have a needle. He was able to do something for us. If only three workers were needed that day, we only had to switch on three polishing lathes when in the past, once the machine started, all 20 polishing lathes would also be cranked up. And it was achieved in a matter of days. (Poh Kon Yong, Zoom interview, February 5, 2021).

The exposure to technical assistance influenced Poh Kon to pursue a mechanical engineering degree at the University of Adelaide. Through his education in Australia, Poh Kon improvised the alloy mix in pewter to pave the way for more intricate designs. The family also made Australia the first non-Asian export market in the early 1970s.

As an undergraduate student, Poh Kon experimented with various combinations of alloys and tin and their properties to make pewter with different levels of hardness in metallurgy classes. Knowing that this would help with his family business, his mentor, Professor D.R. Miller, made him a three-dimensional ternary diagram which provided accurate melting points for alloys with various combinations of tin, antimony, and copper at different percentages. At the South Australian Institute of Technology, once a week, Poh Kon learnt to handle lathe spinning machines whereby some of the machine designs became a background knowledge for custom made machines at the Selangor Pewter. During a term vacation in his undergraduate studies, Poh Kon interned at an oil filter company. While the business was not related to pewter, the company had a design department focusing on product design that inspired Poh Kon to form a similar department in Selangor Pewter.

3.2. Inception and Early Development of a Design Department

As a young manufacturing company with limited resources, Selangor Pewter's design process was by and large ad-hoc, with no systematic approach to archiving designs nor consciousness to create a consistent brand identity. This strategy, or rather, its lack of, had worked during the 1950s when the product line consisted mainly only of beer mugs, tankards, cigarette boxes and condiment sets. The company's chief designer was Peng Kai, who would also sometimes get new design ideas based on customer feedback. He also sourced talent from art instructors whom he would commission to design trophies when Selangor Pewter expanded its product line to commemorative items. Later, Peng Kai hired one of the art instructors to coach the company's future first design department head—his niece Guay Boon Lay (1951–). In 1957, at age six, Boon Lay and his elder sister, who was eight, moved into the Yong household and gone to school with Mun Ha and Mun Kuen. Peng Kai had noticed Boon Lay's artistry from the start and invested in her early art education in drawing and painting lessons every weekend. He would drive Boon Lay to class, sit outside patiently while she took the lesson and drive her home. The idea was to get Boon Lay onboard after she completed her high school education as the company designer.

But Poh Kon, Peng Kai's youngest son, had bigger plans for Boon Lay. He convinced Peng Kai to use company funds to sponsor Boon Lay for a 20-month intensive design course at the Bristol Polytechnic (formerly known as The West of England College of Art). Poh Kon had already done his research by corresponding to the teaching staff there to curate a course for Boon Lay with a focus on metal designing. She also spent six months on a jewelry-making course at Birmingham, the jewelry quarter of England. Knowing that her time in England was limited, Boon Lay tried her hand in every craft she was interested in: woodworking, jewelry designing, sculpturing, and

graphic designing. Boon Lay returned to Malaysia in 1971 to a heady growth period for Selangor Pewter. The company started exporting to Australia, its first export market in 1970. In 1972, German pewter manufacturer Rödgers—also a family business—approached Selangor Pewter for a joint venture partnership to manufacture pewter under the German brand, while the company was also diversifying into gold and silver jewelry manufacturing for exports.

While the work as the company's first official chief designer was cut out for her, the company, did not know where to place her and her "studio". The prototype design department began as a three-person team—two designers including Boon Lay and a sculptor— at the top of Selangor Pewter's factory, next to the Accounts Department. Boon Lay used a large piece of fabric she brought back from England to cordon off the "studio" area for her team which had quickly grown to six staff. As other departments were also growing at a fast pace, the "design studio" had to be relocated three more times, as departments competed for space with increasing headcount. Poh Kon gave the design department a permanent floor space in its new factory-cum-showroom in Setapak in 1976, which overlooked the picturesque hills of Kuala Lumpur to "give the artists more inspiration" (Boon Lay Guay, Zoom Interview, March 26, 2021).

The studio's main responsibilities were to come up with pewter designs specifically for the Australian market. The family's familiarity with Australia began in the 1950s, as Selangor Pewter's beer mugs and tankards were popular among the British and Australian armed forces that were stationed in Malaya since the post-war era. Further, Poh Kon's exposure to Australian culture and taste after spending four years at the University of Adelaide, made it seem even more a natural choice for the company to test the market there. Australia was also prosperous enough to buy pewter tableware, which were not for every-day use and so, inexpensive but nevertheless non-essential decorative items for the household. The timing to explore the Australian market coincided with its resources boom fueled by Japanese industrialization in the early 1970s (Broomhill, 2008). Australia was enjoying full employment during the period, women included. New demand for pewter arose from its key change in alloy composition. Pewter manufactured prior to the 1950s contained 10 to 15 per cent lead, which was later discovered to be poisonous. But as standards changed whereby quality pewter could be made using 95 per cent tin with the rest being a combination of other alloys such as antimony and copper, the appearance of pewter became brighter and shinier, like silver. Yet, as it was cheaper and required less work in polishing than silver, it became a popular substitute in flatware and tableware, a trend which could also be observed in the US (Robinson, 1978).

In Australian departmental stores, Selangor Pewter was usually placed at the tableware

department, although its product line of beer mugs, ash trays and tankards were quite different from the other tableware displays by the more renowned and prestigious Royal Copenhagen, Royal Doulton and Wedgwood on the same floor. But it informed the marketing and design team new product ideas such as wine goblets with pewter stems apt for entertaining guests at dinner parties. The design process was snappy and informal. The marketing team in Australia would usually call Boon Lay asking for some new designs, from which designers would make some quick sketches and put into production immediately once the designs were approved. Each design would be produced and marketed in four sizes to accommodate the various wines and beverages to be used for. Every pewter design was made firstly for the Australian market in mind, and if the products were popular, then the marketing team would push similar products out in the Malaysian and Singaporean market. As chief designer, Boon Lay was also in charge of designs for “special orders”, a business segment which included awards, commemorative gifts, corporate gifts, and trophies for the Malaysian and Singaporean markets. The design team also had to do graphic design for printed materials such as press releases, brochures, and catalogues as it was more economical to have designs done in-house. Boon Lay worked closely with Poh Shin, whose adept public relations skills had been instrumental in raising the company profile in Singapore, and Mun Ha, who oversaw public relations and advertising in Kuala Lumpur. Still in its early formation, the design team helmed by Boon Lay functioned as a support team to other departments until Danish designer Anders Quistgaard, who would also be Boon Lay’s future husband, officially came onboard and formalized the design department in 1976.

Boon Lay reflected:

The idea of design was so difficult to explain or grasp. At that time, when I told people I was a designer, they would ask, “What’s that? What do you actually do?” Sometimes, I wasn’t even sure myself! I think sometimes, I was like the Girl Friday of the company, helping out in all sorts of tasks, especially at the early phase. I think it was the *modus operandi* of a typical Chinese family business. But Anders’ appointment changed all that (Boon Lay Guay, Zoom Interview, March 26, 2021).

4. Using Design and History to Create Brand Identity

4.1. ‘1885’: Putting History into Selangor Pewter’s Craft

Until Anders’ appointment into the company in 1976, Selangor Pewter’s brand identity was modest and reflected more its home market rather than the company itself. Between 1960 and

1967, the company used mainly the tagline “Malaya/Malaysia’s Gift to the World” to tourists that flocked to Malaysia which was being promoted as a “happy country” with “palm-fringed beaches” and “friendly happy people” (Malaysia Department of Tourism, 1963). A second frequently-used promotional tagline was “Made of Straits Refined Tin”, reflecting on the purity and quality of tin produced by Malaysia, rivalled only by the Bangka Tin mined in Indonesia. A key contribution which Anders made was to externalize the company’s history from the realm its managers’ subconsciousness into a full-fledged brand identity, using ‘1885’—the year the pewter enterprise was supposedly established as the marker of the company’s longevity and success.

Anders Quistgaard came from a distinguished lineage of Danish artists—his father was famed silversmith and later industrial designer Jens Quistgaard, while his grandfather was a sculptor. Jens Quistgaard was instrumental in bringing Danish Modern flatware ware into middle class American households in the 1950s, using cheaper materials such as stainless steel to make affordable, yet stylish kitchenware. Jens’ design of cutlery for American brand Dansk became a benchmark for what was “modern-living” during that era. Hence, Anders’ upbringing was filled with the Danish Modern as a design concept. In 1975, the Malaysian government invited Selangor Pewter to participate at the Malaysian Pavilion of Messe Frankfurt, the world’s largest and most important trade fairs. In each pavilion, companies of the participating country could exhibit not only their best designs, but also network with a sizeable and international group of buyers attending the fair. Through the event, Boon Lay was acquainted with Anders. Anders had recently relocated to Prai, in the northern tip of Peninsula Malaysia to work as a designer at a timber factory (a subsidiary of United Plantations, a plantations company run by a Danish family since 1906). Poh Kon was already acquainted with Anders and was interested to get him onboard Selangor Pewter’s design team. With an obligation to serve his contract with United Plantations, Anders could not officially join the company until 1976, whereby he quickly started laying out ideas to shape Selangor Pewter’s branding identity.

In 1977, Anders designed a diamond-shaped logo with the name of the company and the inscription ‘1885’ against a lapis lazuli background, symbolizing the year the pewter enterprise was established by Peng Kai’s father. The actual year the business was set up was in fact, could not be dated that precisely, family members revealed, but Anders stressed that the reason to communicate a narrative of the business’s longevity was beyond aesthetics, it would differentiate the company from its rivals. Selangor Pewter was a mid-sized firm with about 300 employees and was dependent on its network of agents and distributors in all its markets. The company had to constantly compete with other smaller pewter players such as Penang Pewter, Lion City, Jade Lion, Hongean Pewter, Universal Pewter and National Pewter for display space (see Figure 1). A key problem which Selangor Pewter faced was that some of these rivalling

pewter companies were copying its best-seller designs and producing knockoff versions of its most popular designs. When these products were put next to the ones produced by Selangor Pewter, there was little differentiation between the two appearance-wise, resulting in some customers purchasing its rivals' products as they were priced lower albeit poorer quality.



Figure 1: An advertisement by one of Selangor Pewter's rivals on its products ("Lion City Pewter", 1976).

Selangor Pewter started utilizing design registrations, issued press releases, and placed advertisements on *The Straits Times*, the leading English language newspaper in Singapore and Malaysia, to warn its rivals and educate consumers about purchasing fake Selangor Pewter products or unauthorized copying of its designs (see figure 2, 3 and 4). Despite being an independent country, when it came to patenting laws, Malaysia was still relying on British laws for design protection. Before placing the products in the market, Selangor Pewter's managers had to choose which designs they thought would be bestsellers to be registered in the United Kingdom under the Registered Designs Act 1949, making it a costly process as it involved legal expertise in two jurisdictions. The registration in the United Kingdom came with certificates with numbers issued on the designs and was thus, treated as an extension to Malaysian companies under Section 2 of the United Kingdom Designs (Protection) Ordinance of Singapore, Malaya, Sabah, and Sarawak. Even so, protection was only limited to the aesthetic appearance and not the technical aspect or method of the production, unlike how patents functioned. Such system continued until September 1, 1999, when Malaysia repealed the system and replaced it with the Industrial Designs Act 1996 (Industrial Designs Act, 1996). The warning notices then had to be publicized through advertisements, which became part of Selangor Pewter's media

campaign to raise awareness on how to look out for authentic Selangor Pewter items as well as touchmarks guaranteeing its quality.



Figures 2, 3 and 4: Several advertisements which Selangor Pewter placed from the years 1975 to 1979 warning against unauthorized copying of its pewter designs (“Warning Notice, 1975, 1976, 1979).

But it did not deter the rivalling pewter companies from continuing to copy Selangor Pewter’s original designs for as long as they can. A longer-term branding strategy was needed to set the company apart from newer rival pewter companies that had little grounding in design and technique, and were trying to ride on the successes of Selangor Pewter. Anders created not only the logo and have it patented, but the entire concept of packaging for Selangor Pewter’s products, placing pewter products inside specially-designed lapis lazuli-colored boxes and making them look prestigious as if they were designer products. By emphasizing on the business longevity and legacy that Selangor Pewter had, it also externalized the company’s consciousness of its own family and business history into a successful marketing too, giving the family business legitimacy in guiding consumer taste in home décor. Following his advice, Selangor Pewter decorated its reception room for VIP guests in Danish Modern furniture, as the factory-cum-showroom was becoming a popular stop for local and foreign dignitaries and celebrities. Anders also combined pewter with other materials such as wood (known as The Admiral Line) and designed pewter with high polish to give a silver-like finish in the Sovereign Collection of tea set. Poh Kon, who was constantly open to new design ideas, was supportive of Anders’ experimentation and had approved the setting up of dedicated workshops for Anders, including a woodwork station, where he could put into practice wood-carving skills he had learnt through

an apprenticeship at Mizusawa Kōmuten, an architecture firm based in Kyoto famous for tea pavilion designs.

Yet, Selangor Pewter did not adopt the “design mindset” in its entire value chain as readily as Anders had envisioned. As the company grew, the layers of communication became bulkier and increasingly challenging for design ideas to get a buy-in from other departments. Anders’ eccentricity and non-conformist identity did not sit well with a conservative management made of mostly Malaysian Chinese. The Design Department regularly faced resistance at the product design and development stage, either because the Production Department had felt some of the designs were too radical and complicated to execute, or that the Marketing Department insisted that only designs that could be commercialized be considered (Boon Lay Guay, Zoom Interview, March 26, 2021). An example of conflict arose when Anders wanted to construct the world’s largest pewter tankard to commemorate the company’s centennial celebrations in 1985 (Chen, 2003, p.83). To other departments, it was absurd and impractical but Anders finally got his way with Poh Kon’s nod of approval. Anders would continue to need Poh Kon’s credibility as chairman to effectively communicate the Design Department’s stream of ideas to other departments. A House Design Committee—sat by the Design Department, the Production Department and Marketing Department, and chaired by Poh Kon—was set up so that all stakeholders across departments would be able to discuss and debate on the design ideas, and formalize the design and product development process (Boon Lay Guay, Zoom Interview, March 26, 2021). However, a designer-led way of organizational learning was perhaps ahead of its time.

Anders and Boon Lay left Selangor Pewter in 1987 and returned to Denmark, but left a foundational legacy whereby design gradually became a philosophy of the company, which no other local company in Malaysia at that time had gone so deeply into. In terms of size and turnover, the company was still mid-sized but a public persona and aura of the company made it seem larger than it really was. With a compelling company narrative socialized both within the company and the market, the company went about seeking opportunities to legitimize the narrative and image it constructed. It extended the knowledge from jewelry-making into elevating the status of pewter, and commissioned renowned industrial designers to create pewter collections, pushing harder to increase the standards of design. The strategies made it more difficult for rivaling companies to copy the designs and quickened Selangor Pewter’s pace for internationalization in the 1980s.

4.2. Legitimizing its position as the authoritative voice on Southeast Asian Pewter

Selangor Pewter active engagement with historical artefacts was pivoted in its interests to showcase the historicity of pewter through the lens of its own company history. As an extension of the narrative of Yong Kong's legacy of the pewter business set up in 1885, Anders had proposed an exhibition to be held in 1985 of antique pewter pieces, including those made by Yong Koon. Over the years, Anders and Boon Lay had travelled around the world buying old pewterware to build a collection for the company. This interest was also shared by other family members, especially Mun Kuen, the younger daughter and family member manager specializing in corporate and VIP customer relations.

What started off as a family private collection of pewter, the company invested in proper storage, registration, and curation to form the Selangor Pewter Antique Collection. For its centennial celebrations, Mun Kuen approached the *Muzium Negara*, the National Museum, which agreed to host the exhibition "100 Years of Pewter" ("House of Pewter", 1985). The following year, the exhibition was replicated with the National Museum of Singapore to exhibit over 160 pewter items—most of which came from the company's collection of its products over the years—at the "Pewter in South-east Asia Exhibition" ("100 Years of Pewter", 1986). The wider context of the exhibition was to demonstrate the relationship between pewter and the Chinese migrant culture in the region at the turn of the 20th century, essentially the narrative of Selangor Pewter itself. The exhibitions elevated the company status to that of being the living history of pewter of Southeast Asia, legitimizing the company's narrative as the leader and pioneer in pewter manufacturing which no rival could lay claims on.

Simultaneously, the company also began to consciously attach prestige to its brand identity by reaching out to affluent collectors in Malaysia and Singapore through an unconventional albeit controversial side business—selling antiques from shipwrecks. The business opportunity came through a friendship between Poh Shin—the eldest son and public relations head—and Mike Hatcher, a British treasure hunter living in Australia. In 1985, Hatcher excavated over 150,000 pieces of 18th century export Chinese porcelain and the gold ingots dubbed the "Nanking Cargo" from a sunken Dutch East India (VOC) merchant ship later known as the *Geldermalsen*. The ship had sunk in the waters of South China Sea, just between the Sumatera Island of Indonesia and Singapore in 1752 while enroute from Canton (present-day Guangdong, China) to Amsterdam (Miller, 1992, pp. 124–131). The *Geldermalsen* demonstrated the authority of the VOC porcelain trade with China in the 18th century, carrying precious gold ingots, tea, and export Chinese porcelain (Jörg, 1986). After more than 230 years of lying below the sea, the articles arrived in Amsterdam in 1986 to be auctioned at Christie's whose sales exceeded US\$15 million, out of which US\$13.5 million were by porcelain auctions, the second highest value ever received for

ceramics sold at an auction comprising of an unprecedented international group of bidders, “ from 11 European countries as well as the United States, Brazil, South Africa, Japan, Australia, Malaysia and Hong Kong for the gold and porcelains (Reif, 1986).

At the auction, Selangor Pewter bought 700 pieces of porcelain to be resold to collectors residing in Malaysia and Singapore, including “a tea bowl and saucer set for S\$575, a 11.5 cm tall figurine of a boy for S\$48,000 and a gold ingot weighing 11 oz for bidding from a starting price S\$44,545” (“Haul from Sunken Ship, 1987). Using contacts from its direct marketing department which included Reader’s Digest subscribers (another one of Selangor Pewter’s side businesses), Selangor Pewter sent invitations to its subscribers in Malaysia and Singapore, and organized exhibitions at the Shangri-La in Kuala Lumpur and at its own showroom in Singapore (see figure 5).



Figure 5: An advertisement placed by Selangor Pewter on the Nanking Cargo exhibition-cum-sales in Singapore (Discover the Nanking Cargo [Advertisement], 1987).

Selangor Pewter’s participation in and organization of a prestigious auction and exhibition with a national institution detached its public image from a just another local pewter manufacturing company. More importantly, these “side” activities were a collective effort of all family members, which serves as a feedback loop into reinforcing a collective identity of the family and its sense of purpose in the business community, that is, to be *the* legacy of pewter manufacturing in Asia, if not the world.

5. Internationalization as Strategy to Safeguard Family Ownership

5.1. Limiting Company Size for Jewelry-Manufacturing for Exports

A broader context in the dynamic shift on Malaysia's industrialization process from 1970 explains for Selangor Pewter's urgency to internationalize and deepen its export market. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period of heady growth for both Selangor Pewter, and in the broader sense, the new country, Malaysia. Selangor Pewter's products were popular among the British and Australian armed forces stationed in Malaysia since the post-war era, and tourists. In 1967, Great Britain announced its intention to withdraw troops from Malaysia and Singapore as part of its 'East of Suez' policy, marking an end of significant and steady stream of businesses for Selangor Pewter. Altogether, 26,000 British and Australian troops left Malaysia and Singapore in 1971 (Australian High Commission Malaysia, n.d.). With almost all its sales derived from the domestic market and only 2% from exports, the company had to find ways to bring stability to its revenue stream. A sense of urgency to export more deepened when the Malaysian government embarked on a pervasive social reconfiguration following the country's worst racial clash in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1969 that left 196 dead (Abdul Razak, 1969). The New Economic Policy was a broad and sweeping policy to address the social imbalances mainly between the Malays, many of whom lived in rural areas and had felt left out from the country's economic progress and the Chinese, whose population was more concentrated in the urban areas and had more representation in businesses as well as professional and managerial positions.

The real threat for businesses came when the Malaysian government implemented the Industrial Coordination Act 1975 (ICA), which required all manufacturers to apply for an operating license by the state. The purpose of the policy was "to provide for the coordination and orderly development of manufacturing activities in Malaysia" (Industrial Coordination Act 1975 Malaysia). Under the ICA, companies would have to meet 30 requirements, the most controversial and important one being the required allocation of 30% share capital to the *bumiputera* or Malay investors if a company's paid capital exceeded RM500,000. This blanket requirement affected all mid-tiered and large companies, exacerbated by active takeovers of British and foreign-owned plantation groups and tin mines operating since the colonial period by state-owned investment body PERNAS from 1975 onwards (Yasuda, 1991, p.337). In its essence, the policy was to enable the state to achieve an ideal stock ownership ratio by Malays, non-Malays, and foreigners to 30%, 40%, and 40% respectively by the year 1990, from 2.4%, 34.3% and 63.3% as of year 1970 (Third Malaysia Plan, 1976).

However, in actual practice, the policy sent a wrong signal to the business community. The policy

was effectively micromanaging structures of existing and future company setups when most local companies were young and in need of a variety of multinational corporations to invest in the country and provide learning skills, thus derailing entrepreneurship development at a pivotal time. Family businesses in Malaysia, given their tendency to want to retain both ownership and control of the company met this policy with resistance. Selangor Pewter was no exception.

An effective way to evade from having to meet the ICA requirement and still get a manufacturing license was to limit the amount of share capital when setting up a new company. In 1977, when Selangor Pewter applied for a manufacturer's license for Selberan under the ICA, the company had a paid-up capital of RM450,000 (about US\$111,000 today). The amount of capital was below the RM500,000 threshold under the ICA that would require a 30% share allocation to *bumiputera*. By remaining small, Chinese owned businesses could retain ownership and control, yet allowed the new joint venture to enjoy government incentives targeted at inducing local businesses to export. But it was also a double-edged sword. Many local companies deliberately cap their investments and so limit their scope and appetite for technological advances resulting in low macroeconomic significance. They kept becoming SMEs rather than attempt to transition into becoming large firms attracting larger pools of talent, technology, and networks, all for the sake of protecting one's business from outsiders. Such ecosystem would continuously shape Malaysia's industrialization for the next 36 years and only scrapped in 2009, after much lobbying efforts by Poh Kon and other Malaysian entrepreneurs as unfriendly to business ("Scrapped—30% bumi equity rule," 2009).

5.2. Royal Patronage to Elevate International Brand Status

Selangor Pewter also maintained its family ownership by actively elevating its brand status and internationalizing, which helped in gradually distancing itself from its Chinese family business identity. While it did not deliberately whitewash its identity, its growing presence in the Australian market shifted public perception from focusing on the managers' ethnicity to the company's brand status in its early stage of internationalization. In 1978, while on a visit a David Jones store in Perth, Australia, a salesperson had approached the then-Sultan of Selangor, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, and told him that she knew the name 'Selangor' because of the pewter company. The Sultan was apparently so amused that his home state was made well known by Selangor Pewter, that decided to grant the company with the status as royal pewterer. It was the Sultan's first and only royal warrant to a company, conferred in 1979, whereby every piece of pewter which the Sultan bought from the company from thereafter was engraved with

the words: “By royal appointment to his Royal Highness, The Sultan of Selangor” (“The Royal Warrant”, n.d.).

With a royal patronage by a Malay sultan, Selangor Pewter’s collective identity shifted from being a typical Chinese family business to one with national identity. The royal status, together with its growth in exports, gave the company a lot more ground into justifying why it did not have to give up control of its company through the ICA requirement. Yet, it would take another decade for the company to capitalize on the royal warrant it received, whereby the family business changed the company name to Royal Selangor International Sdn. Bhd. in 1992, to reflect on its global business identity which was starting to take shape from the mid-1980s.

The decision was one that took years because Selangor Pewter was not only strongly tied to the its core business in pewter-manufacturing, but also a family business identity established by Peng Kai. The word pewter had become somewhat too generic for a brand identity, and Australian customers have tended to call the items a “Selangor” rather than a “Selangor Pewter” mug or tankard. As such, it was more important to keep the name ‘Selangor’, which also had the legacy of being one of the richest tin regions in the world. The name ‘Royal Selangor’ was also befitting as it would elevate the status of the company overseas, whose products were displayed alongside those of Royal Doulton, Royal Copenhagen and Baccarat’s in departmental stores. Royal Selangor would be the one and only Malaysian company to be able to have such a name, as the Malaysian government prohibits company names to reflect connections with the royalty since 1997 (“Guidelines for Naming a Company”, n.d.).

5.3. Revolutionizing the Design Process through Collaborations with International Designers

Selangor Pewter’s internationalization from the 1970s and 1980s coincided with a period when Malaysia was anxious to catch up with more matured and industrialized ones, using the widely adopted formula of mass production of semi-finished goods. However, Selangor Pewter’s production strategy for internationalization retained a hand-crafted quality with medium mass production, akin to the ‘flexible specialization’—coined by Sabel & Zeitlin (1997)—and adopted by Italy’s specialized production in textiles, household goods and crafts such as Alessi (Lees-Maffei, 2002). The company typifies Italy’s small and medium-sized manufacturers to seek innovations in design while retaining versatile production methods without having to invest too heavily to upgrade its machinery. The flexible specialization strategy was adopted as the company diversified into jewel into manufacturing 14-carat gold and diamond jewelry with European design and standards for both the domestic and export markets through a 50-50 joint

venture with Walter Angelmahr, an Austrian gem setter, and Werner Eberhard, a Swiss master jeweler, to incorporate Selberan in 1973 (Poh Kon Yong, personal communication, January 22, 1973). The idea was to harness European techniques to improve on its product lines and quality in pewter, whose production technique was also being revolutionized following an ongoing partnership with German pewter manufacturer Rödgers. Eberhard, a Swiss national, had studied at the Zurich Art School and had worked at Bucherer, one of Switzerland's oldest and celebrated watch and jewelry makers, and a partner behind the Rolex brand of luxury watches. Together with Angelmahr, a certified gemmologist, they had moved to Perth recently to establish a jewelry manufacturing firm using their own brand names, with clientele in Australia, Fiji, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Poh Shin had met the wives of Angelmahr and Eberhard serendipitously. They had told him about the difficulty of finding skilled and inexpensive labor to produce jewelry in Europe. Poh Shin persuaded them to join hands with Selangor Pewter instead.

The deal included directorships of Selberan, in return for their knowledge transfer to 116 of Selangor Pewter's existing and newly employed local craftsmen and craftswomen to make gold rings set with precious stones to be entirely exported (Poh Kon Yong, personal communication, January 22, 1973). In return, Selangor Pewter would bear all duties in marketing and distributing the jewelry to its network of high-end gift centers, departmental stores, and jewelers all over the world at no royalty charged; and cost advantage in production through lower labor rates compared to those in Europe and Australia (Poh Kon Yong, personal communication, January 22, 1973). Both Angelmahr and Eberhard also agreed to stay in Malaysia indefinitely, due to their key positions in the new company, and bring an additional of two craftsmen from Switzerland to train the local craftspeople for three years. Using modern equipment to craft rings with intricate designs, Selberan introduced European technology to the local goldsmith industry, which was dominated by small Chinese goldsmiths at that time. As business partners, Angelmahr and Eberhard provided not only capital, but technical know-how in ring design, gem-setting and converting raw gold into 18-carat gold. Initially, all machinery and raw materials had to be imported as Malaysia did not produce enough gold to meet Selberan's production demands. For the first six months, Angelmahr and Eberhard and two Swiss craftsmen trained 130 local artisans in rented shophouses while facilities were being built in the pewter factory vicinity. It took a year's training in ring designing and crafting, and another five years to be fully trained in gem setting (see figure 9). For the first five years of incorporation, Selberan manufactured mainly 18-carat gold rings mounted with precious stones, with plans to expand the production line to brooches, lockers, and pendants. However, on the pewter manufacturing side, Selangor Pewter learnt from the process of jewelry making a new technique: using hand sculpted molds as master copies to create odd-shaped and intricate

pieces (see figure 6).

Following the appointments of Angelmahr and Eberhard, Selangor Pewter increasingly relied on outsourcing its designs through collaborations with European designers. The Danish Modern's influence on Selangor Pewter continued as the company sought collaborations with Erik Magnussen, one of the world's most renowned industrial designers at that time, with a collection of drinking vessels embodying the smooth, polished, and clean lines of Danish design. Magnussen came onboard not through a connection with Anders even though they were personal friends, but rather, by a personal intrigue with pewter as a material. His creation of the pewter hip flask eventually won the 1991 Design Plus Award at the Frankfurt International Gift Fair and remains part of the company's product line currently. New pewter designs and technological constraints by the company served as a feedback loop to one another, as Poh Kon sought new production techniques outside the pewter industry to design machines that could mass produce high quality pewter items at a higher speed. For instance, an encounter with a general manager of Alcan Malaysia inspired him to innovate a spinning lathe whereby cylinder-shaped pewter items could be standardized through a similar machine that shaped aluminum pipes (Poh Kon Yong, Zoom Interview, February 1, 2021).

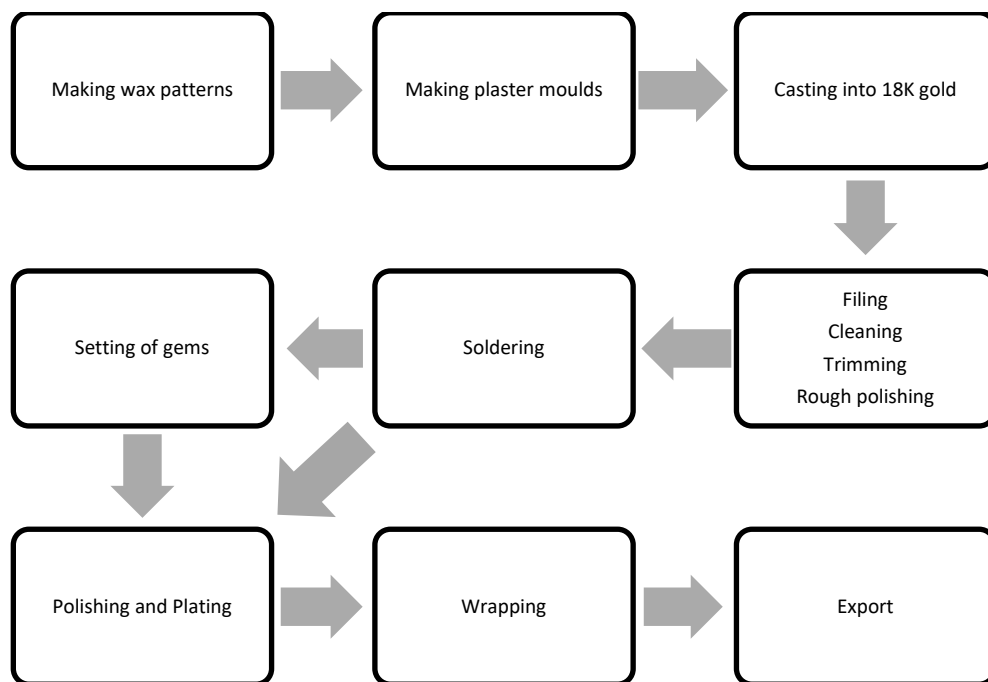


Figure 6: Flowchart of production process of Selberan 18K gold rings (business communication, January 22, 1973).

As pewter tableware designs such as wine goblets, decanters and candlesticks became popular among Australian consumers and increasingly female given their roles as household managers

and interior decorators in the domestic realm, the change of profile of customers—from the military forces in the 1950s and 1960s—also diversified from product lines with masculine designs to designs with more curves to appeal female consumers such as the ‘Tulip Vase’ which Boon Lay designed which inspired the company’s future range of tableware. Such sensibility would continue as the company tried to break into the British market in the late 1980s.

6. Conclusion

As a pioneer in industrialization in a developing economy, Selangor Pewter had to learn how to internationalize from scratch, relying on networks it cultivated with foreign designers and creative talents. But such collaborations and cooperation by the influential designers should not be taken for granted as natural, simply because the company was in a crafts-based industry. A foundation was laid when Selangor Pewter formalized its design department, which set the tone as to how the company should perceive its identity to be. The design mindset gave the company a collective identity rooted in its history, and that its business longevity was a testament to being an arbiter of good taste and design. While business longevity was intentionally brought into the foreground to legitimize its position as a trusted and reliable pewter manufacturer, it did something more—it served as a feedback loop to shape a collective identity within the company, which corroborated with Hansen’s (2007) observation on how a company “situated its past into the present”. The company created new interpretations for pewter and transform the ancient alloy with contemporary designs in tableware and christening gifts line.

To legitimize its position as the standard setter of authenticity and quality among middle class consumers, Selangor Pewter’s attention and awareness shifted to efforts to educating consumers on product design as the company also took on jewelry manufacturing as well as marketing dealerships on jewelry with precious stones such as diamonds. In fact, Selangor Pewter went as far as promoting brilliant-cuts as opposed to carats as a better measurement of sparkle, aimed at middle-class consumers seeking more affordable jewelry. Step by step, through learning how its identity shifts across markets and time, Royal Selangor became more than just a pewter manufacturer. Its prestigious connections allowed the company to not just retain but flesh out more fully its identity while catering to changes in consumption taste and patterns. The company chose flexibility and specialization over the standard push for mass production to build size and scope countering assumptions that the latter was the only pathway to success and business longevity. As such, this historical narrative goes on to show that even a medium-sized family firm in a crafts-based industry could raise the standards of industrial

design and enhance their brand identity by retaining and re-narrating their historical legacy.

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