

Cultural Capital Development: A Case Study of Local Entrepreneurs on Textile Design and Production in Nan Province, Northern Thailand

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Abstracts

Cultural capital exists in both tangible and intangible forms, encompassing lifestyle, beliefs, architecture, products, and objects that constitute integral parts of societal fabric. Especially concerning tangible cultural capital like traditional textiles, it conveys economic value. Cultural textiles in Thailand are crafted from silk, cotton, or hemp and are produced ethically, benefiting local communities. The diverse ethnic groups in Thailand create unique textiles using a variety of techniques, patterns, and materials. This research aims to explore the objectives, methodologies, and stylistic approaches used in textile design and production, by three emerging local entrepreneurs in Nan province, a region in northern Thailand renowned for its rich Tai Lue cultural capital. The research method is qualitative research, involving interviews with three selected entrepreneur participants in Nan province. The research uncovered the following insights: (1) The primary objective of textile production is to earn a living, leveraging skills and knowledge inherited from past generations. Faced with the decision of preserving or developing new textiles using cultural capital, all three entrepreneurs preferred to strike a balance between both approaches. (2) All local entrepreneurs draw inspiration from ancient textiles found in households, passed down by relatives, or from mural paintings in temples. They gather and merge these designs with predictions of consumer tastes and fashion trends. (3) The stylistic approach varies depending on the designers' ability to predict market trends or through discussions with made-to-order consumers. Additionally, important design elements still in use include the breakdown of traditional patterns, color schemes, and choices of yarn.

Keywords: Cultural Capital, Nan Province, Tai Lue Textile

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1. Introduction

A key aspect of culture is its function in representing the collective behaviors and belief systems of a group or community through their activities and beliefs. In some cultures, cultural values are embedded in items or practices commonly shared by members of a group. (Throsby, 1999). Each aspect considered as culture, such as architecture, food, clothing, and beliefs, carries its own value. While this value may not align directly with economic value, cultural value can influence how things are interpreted in economic terms. Cultural capital serves as an asset that contributes to this cultural value.

Cultural capital as mentioned by Pierre Bourdieu refers to the symbols, ideas, tastes, and preferences that can be strategically used as resources in social action (Oxford Reference, 2024). An item of cultural capital is defined as an asset embodying cultural value. The concept of cultural capital can be understood in two distinct forms: tangible and intangible. Tangible cultural capital encompasses items like sculptures, buildings, landmarks, and objects. On the other hand, intangible cultural capital refers to practices, beliefs, ideas, and traditions (Throsby, 1999).

As previously mentioned, cultural capital encompasses both cultural and economic value. Tangible cultural capital often aligns more directly with economic value, as it can be traded or priced according to market rates. In contrast, intangible cultural capital exists on a different layer of economic value. Rituals or beliefs may need to be transformed into tangible assets to realize economic value, or they may be converted into services to retain their value.

Cultural products are consumed through acts of interpretation rather than solely for their functional purposes and are typically consumed mentally (Lawrence & Phillips, 2002). Cultural textiles, as cultural products, were originally designed for specific occasions like weddings, funerals, and formal events. Despite this, these textiles exhibit variations, suggesting that consumers select them based on aesthetic preferences like colors, textures, and pattern designs, even when they are meant for the same types of occasions. This suggests that cultural textiles are consumed mentally, going beyond their basic functionality.

A simple test can be applied: If something can go "out of style," it can be classified as a cultural product, and the businesses producing it, along with their competitors, constitute a cultural industry (Ewen, 1988). At this juncture, cultural textiles, rooted in the past and passed down through generations, maintain their original functions. However, societal changes have occurred, affecting the market and consumer preferences. As a result, cultural textiles are often reserved for traditional ceremonies and are seen as traditional attire, making them seem outdated. Nevertheless, there are efforts to incorporate cultural textiles into modern wardrobes for new consumers. This presents an opportunity for cultural textiles to re-emerge in the market as trendy cultural products.

Cultural textiles in Thailand are crafted from silk, cotton, or hemp and are produced ethically, benefiting local communities. Handloom production in Thailand is deeply rooted in local villages and often organized by women-led initiatives (Mangklatanakul, 2022). The diverse ethnic groups in Thailand create unique textiles using a variety of techniques, patterns, and materials. A weaver blends different techniques, motifs, colors, and materials to craft a textile that serves as a symbol of the identity. Cultural textiles in Thailand include fabrics from various minorities like the Tai and Khmer, but do not encompass textiles from other minority groups such as the Hmong, Akha, Karen, Mien, and Lisu (McIntosh, 2000).

Nan is a province located in the upper northern part of Thailand, renowned as the heartland of "Lanna." This picturesque region boasts a rich heritage of arts and culture that has been cherished from ancient times to the present day. To the north and east, Nan shares borders with the Lao People's Democratic Republic, while its western boundary meets Phayao Province. To the south, it connects with Phrae and Uttaradit provinces. Most Nan's terrain is mountainous, adding to its natural beauty.

The Tai Lue are an ethnic group primarily settled in valleys, spanning the regions of northern Thailand, northern Laos, northern Myanmar, and southwestern China (Leepreecha & Jantakad, 2020). During the late 19th century, as modern countries were being established, the Tai Lue people were divided by national borders into different states. In Nan Province, the Tai Lu people predominantly reside in areas such as Tha Wang Pha, Pua, Chiang Klang, Thung Chang, and Chalerm Phra Kiat Districts (the SUPPORT, 2012).

Nan's cultural textiles represent the traditional knowledge of the Tai Lu people. They are woven using the Kan bundle technique, creating striped patterns throughout the textile. The seams are stitched in the Tai Lu style, and plain red, dark red, or brown fabric is used for the top and bottom parts of the Sinh. The Sinh is a tubular skirt with side seams running from top to bottom. The most popular colors for Sinh Kan are purple, blue, black, pink, and magenta. These textiles are crafted from silk, cotton, or a blend of silk and cotton. Silver and gold silk threads are incorporated to create intricate designs that signify the wearer's social rank or status. In the past, weaving a Sinh, which measures approximately 1 meter in length and 1 meter in width, would typically take around 2 weeks. For more intricate patterns, the process could extend to as long as 2 months.

The weaving process begins with preparing the yarn, which is then tie-dyed with intricate designs. These yarns are woven according to pre-designed patterns, using a technique known as Mud Kan. The term "Sinh" denotes a tubular skirt. Sinh Kan textiles are typically crafted from silk or cotton, with the choice of material often reflecting the wearer's social status or luxury, determined by the yarn's rarity. Silk, being more costly than cotton, is commonly used by the elite.

A unique technique involves integrating the Teen Sinh, an additional decorative piece at the Sinh's bottom, with the Khid technique or Jacquard. Among the traditional patterns in Nan's cultural textiles is the Nam Lai design, thought to represent the flow of the Nan River. This zigzag pattern is achieved through a specialized weaving technique. Over time, the Nam Lai pattern has evolved, now featuring a variety of color combinations and scales (the SUPPORT, 2012).

Cultural textiles serve both special occasions and everyday purposes, including items like bed sheets, scarves, Sinh (tubular skirts), blouses, and more. The essence of cultural textiles lies in the careful selection of patterns and colors tailored to specific occasions. Additionally, certain motifs are reserved exclusively for important events. The local community today preserves the textile weaving techniques by passing them down to younger generations through teaching and practice. (Office of the Arts and Culture Promotion, 2012).

At the moment, cultural textiles in Thailand are being promoted with various government supports. One significant department is the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, which exhibits and conserves traditional and royal textiles supported by Queen Sirikit since the 1970s (Thai PBS World, 2020). Meanwhile, local entrepreneurs in different parts of Thailand are still

developing and educating new generations of people, leading to the emergence of new textile business models, including weaving, sewing, dyeing, and various new garment designs.

In terms of starting a cultural textile business, there's a choice to be made: whether to replicate the same textile and sell it or develop new textile patterns, color schemes, or use new materials. This choice depends solely on the vision and production capability of the head of the entrepreneur or the business. This includes market foresight and analytical ability, along with the skill in exploring new designs that will then match consumer needs.

2. Objectives

This paper aims to explore the following objectives: (1) the choices between complete preservation or development according to the changing market; (2) methodologies such as the design process and the inspiration or references behind textile design and production; and (3) stylistic approaches used in textile design and production, including how color, material, or textile patterns are utilized. This exploration focuses on three emerging local entrepreneurs in Nan province, a region in northern Thailand renowned for its rich Tai Lue cultural heritage.

3. Methodology

This research involves three local entrepreneurs in Nan province who have over 10 years of experience in textile design and production, and each has at least one retail outlet in the province. The process includes interviews with these three local entrepreneurs in Nan province, Thailand. The sampling selection involved entrepreneurs who possess skills in at least one of the following: traditional weaving, textile pattern design, or natural dyeing.

The research process employed qualitative research methods with three sections of interviews corresponding to the three objectives. Each section took 20 minutes to complete. The researcher conducted the interviews online with the three local entrepreneurs using platforms such as Zoom or voice calls. The researcher took notes and paraphrased them into formal written words to report the results. The sections of the interview questions are as follows:

3.1 The first section of the interviews, focusing on the first objective of the choices between complete preservation or development according to the changing market, includes: (1) The aim of textile development – whether towards preservation or development, and (2) The main target group based on age range and the estimated proportion between tourists and local consumers.

3.2 The second section of the interviews, focusing on methodologies such as the design process and the inspiration or references behind textile design and production, includes: (1) the method of textile design and production process, and (2) the design references and inspiration for most of the products.

3.3 The third section of the interviews, focusing on stylistic approaches, includes: (1) the origin of fibers and yarns, (2) the use of color combinations, and (3) the development style of textile pattern design.

4. Results

4.1 Results for the first section, which focuses on the first objective of choosing between complete preservation or development according to the changing market.

Table 1: Results for the First Section

Item	Answer
Local entrepreneur 1	(1) I work on both sides since they cater to completely different target groups. Those who want traditional and preserved textiles are generally older, while those who prefer the developed versions are typically younger consumers. However, it is important to target both groups since there is a market for each, and there are still craftsmen who can produce both types of goods. (2) The main consumers are tourists. However, their spending varies according to their age group. Some prefer very traditional textiles because they understand the heritage and value of craftsmanship, while others might prefer cheaper versions based on their budget and everyday usage.
Local entrepreneur 2	(1) There should be a balance between preservation and development in textile design. However, we cannot deny that nowadays, customers come to us in two ways: those who are looking for something unique and traditional, and those who want us to use our craftsmanship to create textiles based on their designs so they can develop other products, such as bags, scarves, and so on. (2) The main consumers are tourists, which vary depending on the season. However, locals are able to find certain types of textiles on their own through their connections and long-standing preferences with local weavers.
Local entrepreneur 3	(1) We prefer the traditional version as we use traditional dyeing and weaving processes. Our consumers are those who appreciate our products, as they have distinctive textures, colors, and finishes. Due to our production capacity, we need to focus on those who prefer traditional textiles. Additionally, we continue to be a source of textiles used in various product categories, such as bed sheets, pillowcases, and more. (2) Since our village is far from the city center, we need to send our products to locals in the city or rely on potential buyers who discover us through social media. These buyers contact us to have our products sent to them at wholesale or retail prices.

4.2 Results for the second section, which focuses on methodologies like the design process and the inspiration or references behind textile design and production.

Table 2: Results for the Second Section

No	Analysis
Local entrepreneur 1	(1) Using traditional textile production processes such as dyeing and weaving. (2) Inspiration and design references are from the archives that the owner has collected over 20 years.
Local entrepreneur 2	(1) Using traditional textile production processes such as dyeing and weaving. (2) Inspiration comes from traditional textiles used in everyday life and the creative patterns found on pottery from the area near the community.
Local entrepreneur 3	(1) using traditional textile production process such as natural color dyeing and weaving. (2) Inspiration comes from local craftsmanship and local wisdom experts.

4.3 Results for the third section, which focuses on stylistic approaches in textile design and production.

Table 3: Results for the Third Section

No	Analysis
Local entrepreneur 1	(1) Fibers and yarns are sourced from local producers within Nan province. (2) The use of color combinations is based on archives collected over the past 20 years. (3) The development of textile pattern designs is based on customer orders and preferences.
Local entrepreneur 2	(1) Fibers and yarns are sourced from local producers or suppliers within the province. (2) The use of color combinations is based on the inspiration of the weavers and consumer preferences. (3) The development of textile pattern designs comes from both the inspiration of the weavers and customer orders.
Local entrepreneur 3	(1) Fibers and yarns are sourced from local producers, especially within the local community. (2) The use of color combinations is based on the collection of plants and dyeing substances, as well as orders from consumers. (3) The development of textile pattern designs is based on customer orders and preferences.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of the textile practices among the three local entrepreneurs reveals significant insights aligned with the three objectives: the balance between preservation and development, methodologies in design and production, and stylistic approaches to textile creation.

5.1 Choices Between Preservation and Development: The entrepreneurs demonstrate a strategic balance between complete preservation of traditional techniques and the development of contemporary designs to cater to changing market demands. They acknowledge the distinct preferences of their consumer base—older consumers often favor traditional textiles for their craftsmanship, while younger consumers gravitate towards

modern interpretations. This dual approach allows them to capture diverse market segments, ensuring that both heritage and innovation coexist in their offerings.

5.2 Methodologies in Design and Production: Each entrepreneur employs traditional textile production processes, including dyeing and weaving, while also drawing inspiration from various sources such as personal archives, local craftsmanship, and community heritage. This blend of methodologies underscores the importance of authenticity and quality in their products. By valuing both traditional techniques and contemporary influences, the entrepreneurs create textiles that reflect a rich cultural narrative while remaining relevant to current consumer preferences.

5.3 Stylistic Approaches: The entrepreneurs utilize a thoughtful approach to color, materials, and patterns in their textile designs. They source fibers and yarns locally, which fosters community ties and supports sustainable practices. The use of color combinations is guided by both natural dyeing processes and consumer preferences, allowing for flexibility and responsiveness in their designs. The development of textile patterns is influenced by customer orders and inspiration from traditional motifs, highlighting a collaborative approach to design that respects both consumer desires and cultural heritage.

In summary, the local entrepreneurs effectively navigate the intricate landscape of textile production by harmonizing preservation with innovation. Their methodologies and stylistic choices reflect a deep commitment to cultural authenticity while adapting to the evolving market, ultimately positioning them for sustainable growth and continued relevance in the textile industry.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Enhance Collaboration Between Artisans and Designers: To further bridge the gap between traditional craftsmanship and modern design, local entrepreneurs should facilitate collaborative initiatives between artisans and contemporary designers. This can include workshops, joint projects, or mentorship programs that encourage the exchange of ideas and techniques. Such collaborations can lead to innovative textile products that appeal to a broader audience while preserving the integrity of traditional practices.

6.2 Develop a Comprehensive Marketing Strategy: Entrepreneurs should consider developing a comprehensive marketing strategy that highlights the unique story and cultural significance of their textiles. This could involve creating engaging content that showcases the production process, the artisans' skills, and the inspiration behind each piece. Utilizing social media and e-commerce platforms effectively can help reach diverse consumer groups, particularly younger audiences, and increase awareness and appreciation for both traditional and contemporary textile offerings.

7. Additional Experiments

The researcher conducted the experiment as part of the research by collaborating with the Baan Sao Luang community enterprise in Nan province to develop textile patterns. Discussions with the local craftsman, Mr. Korakot Pangjai, led to the creation of a modern pattern design derived from traditional geometric textile patterns.

The researcher then purchased five pieces of fabric and brought them back to Bangkok to develop garments using modern pattern cutting and design strategies. This process resulted in five garments, including a blouse, vest, pants, skirt, and dress, to demonstrate the possibilities of bridging the approaches of artisans and designers in enhancing garment development for the local community. Since local entrepreneurs usually produce textiles in pieces for tubular skirts, this type of development will expand the possibilities for locals to design their textiles and market them to a broader audience.

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