Cultural Capital as Structural Leverage: Rethinking University-Community Collaboration for Area-Based Cultural Transformation in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores how cultural capital contributes to sustainable local economic development and the strengthening of community identity in the Thai context through university engagement. It synthesizes findings from 16 university–community collaborative projects conducted under Thailand's 2023 national research initiative on cultural capital. Based on project reports, field observations, and evaluation data, the study identifies key mechanisms through which cultural assets were mobilized to support inclusive and area-based development. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined cultural mapping, participatory storytelling, and targeted capacity building. These methods helped revitalize both tangible and intangible cultural assets. As a result, the projects led to the co-creation of more than 200 new cultural products and services, the emergence of over 300 cultural entrepreneurs and artists, and a 15 percent average increase in income across participating communities. More importantly, the initiatives enabled local actors to shift from passive recipients to active co-creators of cultural value. The study also piloted tools such as digital cultural capital databases and local cultural incubators to improve the connection between cultural resources and local governance. The findings show that partnerships between universities and communities provide a practical and flexible model for managing cultural capital. The study concludes that integrated and systemic management across economic, identity, and policy dimensions is essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable outcomes in diverse local settings.

Keywords: Thailand cultural capital, area development, universities and communities, cultural management

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Introduction

Thailand holds a remarkably rich reservoir of cultural resources, ranging from historical narratives and ritual traditions to artisanal knowledge and distinctive cultural landscapes. Despite this abundance, cultural capital has not been fully integrated into the country's development frameworks. It is often acknowledged in policy but remains peripheral in practice, creating a persistent gap between national aspirations, local realities, and the institutions capable of bridging them. Theoretical perspectives on cultural capital and cultural governance (Bourdieu, 1986; Santasombat, 2013) remind us that cultural resources are not merely symbolic. They shape social relations, identity, and forms of power. These insights are particularly relevant in Thailand, where cultural capital is plentiful yet seldom mobilized as a structural resource for local development.

The Higher Education Act B.E. 2562 highlights this challenge through its identification of the stewardship of art and culture as the fourth mission of Thai universities. Importantly, this mission extends beyond preserving heritage. It calls for the application of cultural knowledge to strengthen communities and support area-based development. This shift reflects wider international discussions that position universities as area-based change agents, institutions that contribute to territorial development through sustained engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and culturally grounded innovation.

Within this context, the 2023 National Research and Innovation Program on Cultural Capital, administered by the Program Management Unit for Area-Based Development (PMU A), provides an opportunity to examine how universities might exercise such a role in practice. The initiative supported sixteen university–community collaborative projects that experimented with documenting cultural assets, co-creating cultural innovations, and reframing local knowledge within development processes. These efforts yielded cultural mapping databases, storytelling platforms, new cultural products, and emerging cultural enterprises. They also revealed institutional mechanisms that allow cultural capital to function as leverage for area-based transformation.

This paper synthesizes insights from the sixteen projects and examines three in-depth cases: Koh Sichang (Chulalongkorn University), Songkhla's dagger craftsmanship (Thaksin University), and the Chiang Saen cultural landscape (Mae Fah Luang University). Placing these cases within broader theoretical and policy debates, the study highlights the institutional conditions, collaborative processes, and governance arrangements that enable cultural capital to generate meaningful and sustainable change in different local contexts.

Literature Review

The concept of cultural capital, most notably articulated by Bourdieu (1986), provides a critical foundation for understanding how cultural resources operate within social structures. Bourdieu identifies cultural capital as a set of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms that influence social distinction and access to opportunities. These forms of capital shape how individuals and communities position themselves within broader systems of value. Although developed in a Western theoretical context, Bourdieu's framework offers analytical tools that are highly relevant to understanding cultural dynamics in Thailand, where cultural identity, symbolic value, and local knowledge continue to play central roles in social and economic life.

Santasombat (2013) contributes to this discussion by highlighting the political dimensions of cultural diversity in Thailand. His work demonstrates that cultural practices are never static; they are shaped through negotiation between communities, the state, and market forces. This perspective underscores the idea that cultural capital cannot be treated merely as heritage to be preserved. Instead, it must be understood as an active field of meaning-making in which power relations are continually contested. Such a view reframes cultural capital as a strategic resource that can influence development trajectories, particularly when communities are empowered to engage with their own cultural assets.

International research emphasizes the importance of institutional intermediaries in enabling cultural capital to support structural change. Jun and Jingkun (2019) argue that cultural resources can contribute to long-term development when supported by institutions capable of organizing knowledge, facilitating participation, and translating cultural value into social and economic outcomes. Their work stresses the need for collaborative structures that bridge the gap between cultural expression and development policy. This insight aligns closely with the challenges observed in the Thai context, where cultural vibrancy is high but mechanisms for mobilizing cultural capital remain fragmented.

Recent studies in Thailand have drawn attention to the need for more coherent frameworks of area-based cultural development. Jintapitak et al. (2024) highlight structural gaps in data systems, cross-sector collaboration, and local governance. They argue that without a central coordinating institution, cultural initiatives tend to remain isolated and struggle to achieve long-term impact. The authors suggest that universities may be well positioned to fill this institutional gap, given their knowledge resources, credibility, and ability to work across sectors.

The literature on transformative learning also offers useful insights into how cultural development unfolds in practice. Mezirow (1997) and, in the Thai context, Asdornnithee et al. (2022), emphasize the value of learning processes that challenge existing assumptions and create space for new understandings. When communities participate in storytelling, cultural mapping, or collaborative design, they not only share knowledge but also reconsider how their cultural assets relate to contemporary life. This form of reflective engagement is essential for generating cultural innovations that are both meaningful and sustainable.

Parallel discussions on the evolving role of universities shed further light on the institutional conditions necessary for area-based cultural development. Scholars such as Benneworth (2013) and Goddard et al. (2019) describe universities as anchor institutions that can contribute to local transformation through long-term partnerships, knowledge mobilization, and place-based engagement. Katwyk and Case (2016) extend this argument by noting that universities must adapt their internal structures to better support community-oriented work. This includes creating flexible mechanisms for collaboration and recognizing the value of cultural knowledge alongside scientific and technical expertise.

Taken together, the literature suggests that cultural capital holds significant potential for driving area-based development when supported by institutions that can integrate knowledge, foster innovation, and enable participatory governance. These insights provide the conceptual basis for examining how Thai universities are beginning to adopt such roles, particularly within national initiatives that position cultural capital as a strategic resource for local transformation.

To translate these theoretical perspectives into a coherent approach for area-based cultural development, the national program adopted a shared conceptual framework that guided project design across all participating universities. The framework outlines a sequential process through which cultural capital is mobilized, beginning with community engagement and cultural mapping, advancing through creative development and capability building, and leading toward enhanced cultural economies and local consciousness. It served as a common reference point that allowed each university to adapt the model to its own context while maintaining methodological coherence across the sixteen projects. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework Used Across Participating Universities for Designing and Implementing Area-Based Cultural Capital Projects

Universities as Drivers of Cultural Capital for Area-Based Development
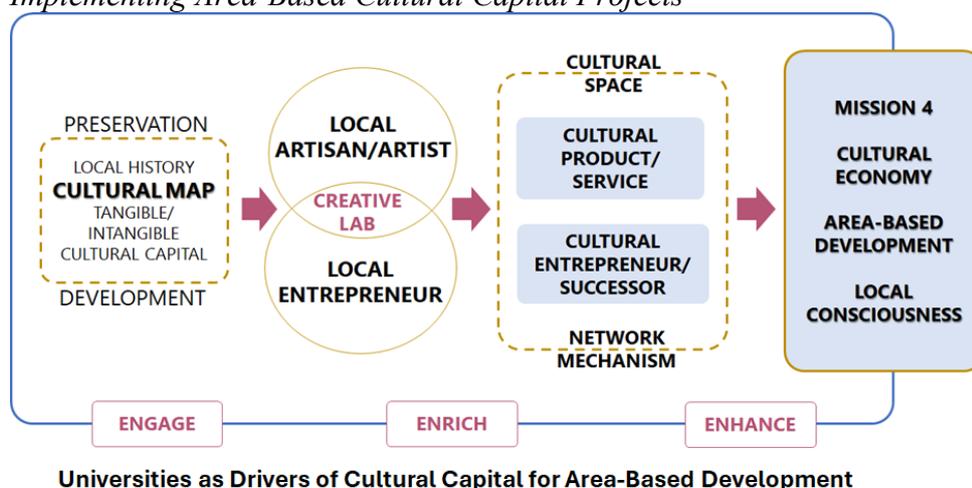
This framework provided a structural foundation for the methods used in each project, ensuring that cultural mapping, creative experimentation, capability development, and community participation were approached systematically. It also informed the analytical structure of this study, which examines how these elements operated in practice and how they contributed to the emergence of cultural entrepreneurs, new cultural products, and locally grounded governance arrangements. The methodological procedures are described in the following section.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to synthesize insights from sixteen projects supported by the 2023 National Research and Innovation Program on Cultural Capital. The aim was to understand how universities mobilized cultural capital in their respective local contexts and to identify the mechanisms that enabled these efforts to produce structural impact. The research drew on a wide range of materials, including project proposals, quarterly and final reports, field observations, transcripts of community consultations, and documentation from workshops and collaborative activities. These sources offered both descriptive accounts and analytical reflections from university teams and community partners.

Qualitative inquiry formed the core of the analytical approach. Each project conducted fieldwork activities such as cultural mapping, community storytelling sessions, semi-structured interviews, and participatory design workshops with stakeholders including cultural practitioners, community leaders, local officials, and emerging cultural entrepreneurs. Field

notes and photographic documentation provided additional contextual information about the cultural landscapes and everyday practices within each area. These data allowed the study to capture the ways cultural assets were identified, interpreted, and translated into new forms of value.

To deepen the analysis, three projects were selected for closer examination: Koh Sichang, Songkhla's dagger craftsmanship, and the Chiang Saen cultural landscape. The selection was based on three criteria. First, each project demonstrated a clear attempt to build a system of cultural capital management rather than focusing solely on product development or single activities. Second, the cases represented different types of cultural assets, including landscapes, craftsmanship, and historical narratives, which allowed for comparative insights. Third, each project showcased distinct institutional strategies employed by universities in their role as area-based change agents. The study did not modify or reinterpret the project outcomes but analyzed them as documented by the project teams.

The analytical process followed a thematic synthesis approach. All textual materials were coded to identify recurring patterns across the sixteen projects. Attention was given to how cultural assets were documented, how stakeholders participated in the process, how innovations emerged, and how governance arrangements took shape. The themes that emerged included cultural asset systemization, community learning, product and service innovation, the emergence of cultural entrepreneurs, and new models of participatory governance. These themes provided a foundation for understanding how cultural capital can function as leverage for area-based development.

Comparative analysis was then applied to the three selected cases to examine how similar mechanisms manifested in different contexts. The analysis focused on institutional strategies, forms of collaboration, the role of cultural professionals and bearers, and the governance structures that emerged during the projects. This approach allowed for the identification of both shared mechanisms and context-specific adaptations. It also enabled the study to highlight how universities navigated structural constraints, including limited local capacity, fragmented cultural data, and uneven access to markets.

Throughout the study, particular attention was paid to the role of universities as intermediary institutions. This involved examining how universities facilitated communication across different sectors, how they supported learning processes within communities, and how they helped build systems for sustaining cultural capital beyond the project period. The mixed-methods design thus provided both breadth and depth, enabling the study to link local practices to broader theoretical frameworks on cultural capital and area-based development.

Results

The synthesis of the sixteen cultural capital projects reveals several overarching patterns in how universities operationalized their role within the national initiative. Across the projects, universities acted as facilitators of knowledge generation, brokers between sectors, and coordinators of collaborative processes that linked cultural heritage to contemporary forms of value creation. Three mechanisms appeared consistently: the establishment of cultural information systems, the development of cultural innovations and creative products, and the emergence of new governance arrangements that encouraged local participation. Across the full portfolio, these mechanisms contributed to more than 200 newly co-created cultural

products and services, the formation of over 300 emerging cultural practitioners and entrepreneurs, and measurable improvements in local income levels in several communities.

To illustrate how these mechanisms operated in practice, the study examines three cases in depth: Koh Sichang, Songkhla's dagger craftsmanship, and the Chiang Saen cultural landscape. Each case represents a different type of cultural resource and a different mode of university engagement, yet all demonstrate how cultural capital can be mobilized to strengthen local identity, generate economic opportunities, and enhance community agency.

Case 1: Chulalongkorn University and the Cultural Landscape of Koh Sichang

The Koh Sichang project focused on reinterpreting the island as a living cultural landscape shaped by its royal history, maritime heritage, and community memory. Chulalongkorn University worked closely with residents to document stories, map cultural sites, and redesign interpretive experiences across the island. Rather than presenting culture as a static collection of landmarks, the project emphasized the lived experience of place and the everyday practices that form the island's identity. The collaborative mapping process supported community members in articulating their own cultural narratives, which in turn informed new routes for cultural tourism and strengthened local stewardship. This process also marked a notable shift in community roles, with residents moving from passive participants to active co-creators of cultural value. (Supsook et al., 2024)

Case 2: Thaksin University and the Revitalization of Songkhla's Dagger Craftsmanship

The Songkhla project concentrated on revitalizing a traditional craft that had faced declining transmission and limited market visibility. Thaksin University partnered with master craftsmen, young apprentices, and local entrepreneurs to document techniques, refine production processes, and explore contemporary design possibilities. Through workshops and co-design sessions, the project helped bridge traditional skills with new market opportunities. This created a pathway for both heritage preservation and economic renewal. New product lines reflected both the integrity of traditional craftsmanship and the tastes of emerging cultural markets. As a result, the project contributed to a growing cultural economy around the craft, supported the training of new practitioners, and strengthened community recognition of the craft's cultural significance. Digital documentation and the creation of an online cultural asset database added further support by improving access to design reference materials and market visibility. (Kaewsuksaeng et al., 2024)

Case 3: Mae Fah Luang University and the Chiang Saen Cultural Landscape

The Chiang Saen project examined how historical narratives and cultural landscapes could generate new forms of cultural engagement. Mae Fah Luang University collaborated with local communities to collect stories rooted in the area's past and to interpret how these narratives continue to shape contemporary cultural identity. Using cultural landscape mapping and interpretive design, the project connected these stories with significant heritage sites and public spaces. A key outcome was the community-led reinterpretation of Wiang Nong Lom, which sparked renewed cultural activities and strengthened local stewardship. Dialogue between community groups and local authorities further supported the recognition of Wiang Nong Lom as a cultural entity with locally grounded oversight responsibilities. The project also encouraged early forms of participatory governance by involving communities in discussions on how key cultural areas should be managed. These processes contributed to the establishment

of a local cultural incubator that provided training, coordination, and support for emerging cultural enterprises in the district. (Prapatthong et al., 2024)

Cross-Case Insights

Although each case operated in a distinct cultural setting, several shared insights emerged. First, community participation was essential for identifying and shaping the cultural assets that formed the basis of each project. The involvement of residents in mapping, storytelling, and collaborative design strengthened the legitimacy of the initiatives and encouraged long-term engagement. Second, innovation emerged when traditional knowledge was connected to new interpretive or economic opportunities, particularly when universities served as facilitators rather than directors. Third, each project contributed to the development of new cultural governance practices. These practices ranged from informal stewardship arrangements to more structured forms of collaboration between local authorities and community groups. Taken together, the cases illustrate a practical and flexible model of university–community partnership that is adaptable across diverse Thai contexts. They also demonstrate how economic, identity-based, and governance dimensions must evolve together for cultural capital to generate lasting structural impact.

Discussion

The findings from the three cases demonstrate that cultural capital can serve as a significant driver of area-based development when supported by institutions capable of organizing knowledge, facilitating collaboration, and enabling communities to participate meaningfully in cultural interpretation and governance. Although each project worked with different cultural resources, the cases collectively illustrate how cultural capital becomes actionable when it is transformed into a shared framework through which communities understand their past and envision their future. This aligns with the literature that emphasizes the importance of institutional intermediaries in bridging the gap between cultural expression and development outcomes (Jun & Jingkun, 2019; Santasombat, 2013).

A central theme across the cases is the importance of shifting community roles from passive participants to active co-creators. Whether through mapping cultural sites on Koh Sichang, refining craftsmanship processes in Songkhla, or reinterpreting historical narratives in Chiang Saen, each project created opportunities for communities to reclaim interpretive authority and to articulate cultural value in their own terms. This process reflects transformative learning principles (Mezirow, 1997) in which participants revisit long-held assumptions and generate new understandings through structured dialogue and collaborative practice. The shift in roles not only strengthened local ownership but also created conditions for cultural innovation that extended beyond the duration of the projects. These dynamics were reflected in the national dataset, which showed the co-creation of more than 200 cultural products and services and the emergence of over 300 new cultural practitioners and entrepreneurs.

Another important insight concerns the role of knowledge infrastructures in enabling long-term cultural development. The cultural mapping systems, digital databases, learning modules, and cultural incubators developed through the projects served as platforms that allowed multiple actors to engage with cultural resources in consistent and constructive ways. Digital cultural capital databases in particular played an important role in standardizing information, supporting collaborative analysis, and improving visibility for both cultural products and local artists. These infrastructures made cultural knowledge more visible, more accessible, and more

adaptable to new forms of economic activity. They also provided reference points for schools, local governments, and cultural practitioners, demonstrating the value of integrated knowledge systems in supporting community learning and cultural governance.

Another important insight concerns the role of universities as area-based change agents. Across the three cases, universities acted as facilitators rather than directors. They created structured processes for engagement, organized multi-sector collaboration, and provided technical expertise in fields such as design, interpretation, and digital documentation. This approach allowed communities to lead decision-making while still benefiting from academic resources. The cross-case synthesis suggests that this university–community partnership constitutes a practical and flexible model for cultural development, one that can be adapted to the specific identities, capacities, and governance conditions of different localities. The cases suggest that universities occupy a distinctive institutional position: they command credibility, possess analytical tools, and have the flexibility to work across state, market, and community boundaries.

At the same time, the findings point to institutional and structural challenges that shape the effectiveness of cultural development initiatives. In several cases, community participation was uneven due to differences in local capacity, generational gaps in cultural knowledge, and limited access to markets. The sustainability of innovations also depended on the extent to which local authorities recognized and supported new governance mechanisms. For example, the emerging oversight structure around Wiang Nong Lom required continued negotiation between communities and local government, while the revitalization of dagger craftsmanship in Songkhla required ongoing training systems and market linkages. These challenges underscore the importance of long-term institutional commitment beyond project cycles.

Finally, the cases reaffirm the argument that cultural capital produces its strongest impact when economic, identity-based, and governance dimensions evolve together. Economic activities rooted in cultural identity gained legitimacy and durability when supported by mechanisms that also strengthened meaning and community ownership. This integrated approach mirrors the conclusion presented in the national synthesis, which argues that systemic management across economic, identity, and policy dimensions is essential for sustaining cultural value in diverse local contexts. Taken together, the findings indicate that cultural capital can serve as structural leverage when supported by institutions capable of integrating knowledge, innovation, and shared governance.

Beyond the specific outcomes of the three cases, the cross-case analysis points to a broader institutional pattern. Universities consistently operated as integrative hubs that brought together innovation processes, governance mechanisms, and human capability development. This coordinating function enabled cultural capital to move from isolated activities toward more systemic outcomes that strengthened identity, expanded local economic opportunities, and improved cultural governance. The integrative model that emerges from the national synthesis is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

University as an Integrative Hub Linking Innovation, Governance, and Capability Development to Provide Structural Leverage for Cultural Capital

Mechanisms of Structural Leverage

University as Integrative Hub
Universities serve as the *structural platform* that links innovation, governance, and human capability - enabling cultural capital to drive inclusive local transformation.

• **Cultural Incubators** – Facilitate innovation, product co-creation, and community-based entrepreneurship.
• **Digital Cultural Databases** – Improve governance, accessibility, and linkage between cultural assets and local policy.
• **Cross-Disciplinary Training** – Build "Cultural Capital Managers" who can integrate culture, economy, and governance.

[Innovation]
(Cultural Incubators)

Structural Leverage for Cultural Capital

[Capability]
(Cross-Disciplinary) Training

University

[Governance]
(Digital Databases) & Access
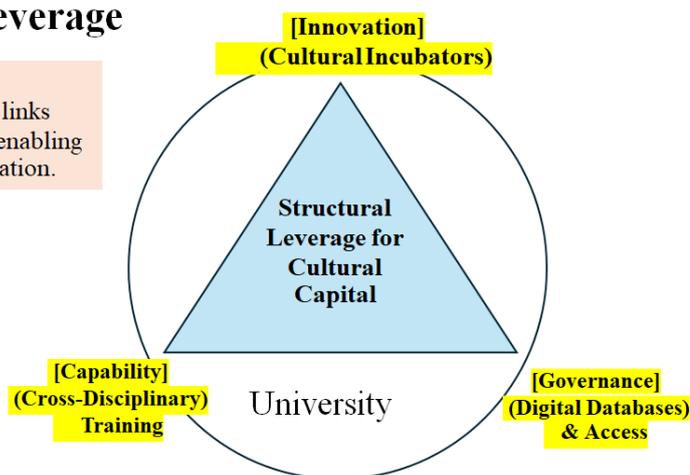
University as Integrative Platform for Cultural Capital Management

This model highlights the institutional position of universities as platforms that coordinate digital infrastructures, cultural incubators, and cross-disciplinary training while maintaining close collaboration with communities. These combined mechanisms created the structural conditions through which cultural capital could be mobilized at scale and translated into meaningful forms of area-based transformation. The implications of this integrative role are discussed further in the conclusion.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cultural capital has the potential to generate meaningful and sustainable forms of area-based development when supported by institutions capable of organizing knowledge, fostering collaboration, and enabling community participation. The three cases illustrate how cultural assets gain new relevance when they are documented, interpreted, and mobilized through processes that blend local knowledge with academic expertise. They also show that communities can become active contributors to cultural innovation when given opportunities to shape the narratives and practices that define their cultural landscapes.

The findings highlight the distinct role that universities can play as area-based change agents. Their ability to work across sectors, provide methodological and technical support, and facilitate participatory processes positions them as effective intermediaries within local cultural ecosystems. When universities act as facilitators rather than directors, communities are better able to claim interpretive authority and develop cultural expressions that reflect their own values. This collaborative mode of work forms a practical and adaptable model for cultural development in diverse Thai contexts.

The analysis also underscores the importance of knowledge infrastructures in supporting long-term impact. Cultural mapping systems, digital databases, learning modules, and local cultural

incubators helped translate cultural resources into accessible tools for education, planning, and economic development. These infrastructures provided continuity beyond the project period and strengthened the capacity of communities, schools, and local authorities to engage with cultural assets in more systematic ways.

At the same time, the cases reveal structural challenges that must be addressed to sustain cultural development over time. Uneven local capacity, limited market access, and overlapping governance responsibilities can constrain community-led initiatives. These challenges point to the need for stable institutional support, long-term investment, and stronger integration of cultural development within local policy frameworks. Without such support, innovations risk becoming isolated rather than contributing to broader systems of cultural governance.

Taken together, the findings affirm that cultural capital can function as structural leverage when economic, identity-based, and governance dimensions evolve in a coordinated manner. The national synthesis, which includes the creation of new cultural products, the emergence of cultural entrepreneurs, and measurable gains in community income, demonstrates the potential scale of this approach. As Thailand continues to explore models of area-based development, the experience of these university–community collaborations offers a compelling pathway for mobilizing cultural resources in ways that honor local identity while supporting inclusive and sustainable transformation.

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