# Transforming Mission 4: Creative Cultural Parks and the Rise of Thai Universities as Local Change Agents

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## Abstract

This study investigates how Thai universities have transformed their cultural mission (Mission 4) from being ceremonial guardians to active change leaders. Through the 2023 Advance Track research program, supported by Thailand's Program Management Unit on Area-Based Development (PMU A), eight universities partnered with local communities to establish Creative Cultural Parks. These parks aimed to revitalize cultural capital as a foundation for local economic growth, community identity, and cultural innovation. Using a mixed-methods approach with a strong focus on participatory action research (PAR), the study examined all eight projects through project documents, field observations, stakeholder interviews, and cultural mapping data. It specifically explored the use of storytelling, creative festivals, and cultural incubators as tools to drive transformation. The results show that universities played a pivotal role in co-creating over 200 cultural products and services, supporting more than 100 new cultural entrepreneurs, and boosting average community income by 15%. Creative Cultural Parks emerged as more than just symbolic landmarks—they became vibrant ecosystems for collaboration, innovation, and identity restoration. Importantly, the program empowered local actors to take ownership of their development journeys through co-creation and cultural entrepreneurship. The study argues that when universities align their cultural mission with community participation and national policy agendas, they can unlock untapped cultural assets and produce tangible social and economic outcomes. It recommends establishing permanent cultural management units within universities and integrating cultural resources into broader development frameworks such as the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) economy and creative economy strategies.

*Keywords:* Thailand cultural capital, Mission 4, creative cultural parks, Thai universities, cultural management

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## Introduction

The Higher Education Act of 2019 mandates that all Thai universities undertake four primary responsibilities: (1) instruction, (2) research and innovation, (3) provision of academic services to society, and (4) preservation and promotion of arts and culture. Mission 4 has consistently been perceived as a ceremonial or conservative obligation primarily focused on safeguarding cultural items, preserving traditions, and organizing cultural events.

This article examines the transformation of Thai universities' cultural mission, Mission 4, from mere "ritual guardianship" to an active role in community development rooted in culture. The Cultural Capital Management for Community Economic and Local Awareness Research (Advance Track) initiative, a component of the Cultural Capital Management for Community Economic and Local Awareness Project Management initiative for Fiscal Year 2023, has precipitated this move. Chiang Mai University administers the program with assistance from the Program Management Unit on Area-Based Development (PMU A). The program aims to position universities as "leaders of spatial change" by integrating cultural preservation (Mission 4) with community economic growth and methodically enhancing local awareness.

As Thailand's economy and society rapidly evolve, and national policy frameworks such as the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy and the Creative Economy develop, universities have begun to perceive Mission 4 as a means to facilitate local advancement.

## Literature Review

Over the past decade, there has been heightened scrutiny of cultural capital and the university's role as a catalyst for local development, especially regarding the creative economy and regional development policy. Many academic publications assert that colleges are no longer merely caretakers of cultural history; they actively translate cultural capital into creative commercial concepts. This transformation occurs through cooperation among communities, government agencies, and the corporate sector, reflecting the broader re-evaluation of the Thai higher education system under Mission 4.

### Cultural Capital and Modern Conceptual Frameworks

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, encompassing embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms, has been further refined by scholars to incorporate the notions of meta-capital and the significance of cultural capital in spatial development (Dzimińska et al., 2020; Frullo & Mattone, 2024). The contemporary analysis indicates that cultural capital is a multifaceted, dynamic phenomenon that must be recognized, particularly when applied to the creative economy or local identity revitalization efforts.

### Universities as Custodians of Cultural Knowledge

Various studies assert that universities could assume the role of managers of cultural knowledge by discovering, organizing, and comprehending local cultural capital, typically through cultural mapping, cultural databases, and value chain analysis (Andrés, 2011; Ashley & Durham, 2021; Mert & Stolarick, 2025). This project enables colleges to serve as a nexus for design, innovation, and local knowledge, concurrently enhancing community development.

## Universities as Catalysts for Cultural Entrepreneurs

Global institutional research reveals that universities are significantly contributing to the emergence of entrepreneurs in the cultural and creative economy. They accomplish this by enhancing the learning process for students, providing training, and generating opportunities to form a network that connects cultural with economic activity (Juruena & Klein, 2016; Leng et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2025). This facilitates the transformation of cultural capital into creative content, services, and experiences, such as cultural festivals, oral traditions, and design innovations.

## Universities as Cultivators of Cultural Human Capital

Furthermore, higher education institutions serve as a primary source for the skill set and leadership attributes of future practitioners in the cultural business. Support is provided through experiential learning, collaboration between universities and communities, and incubation programs for artists and creators (Mayo, n.d.; Ooi & Shelley, 2023; Scott, 2009). These initiatives are essential in ensuring that communities possess successors capable of advancing cultural capital in alignment with the requirements of the creative economy.

## Universities as Catalysts for Local Development

The notion of universities as catalysts for cultural transformation posits that they ought to act as co-creators of change rather than simple custodians of tradition (Dzimińska et al., 2020). This would transport people to the opposite side of sectors, involving engagement with sectors and employing a range of participatory methodologies, including participatory design and participatory action research (Liu et al., 2025; Sara & Jones, 2018). In addition, the establishment of new cultural venues, such as creative hubs and cultural laboratories, represents another method available to universities for facilitating social, economic, and identity-based innovations.

In summary, scientific inquiry indicates that universities are increasingly adopting the role of agents of social change, primarily through three mechanisms: the administration of cultural knowledge, the promotion of cultural entrepreneurs, and the development of cultural human resources. This paper examines these perspectives and applies them to research conducted at eight Thai institutions, arguing that Creative Cultural Parks represent a new institutional mechanism reflecting the university's evolution into a change agent. In doing so, they offer an alternative to the ceremonial perspective of Mission 4, perceiving it instead as a collection of tools for sustainable development.

## Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods paradigm, primarily emphasizing Participatory Action Research (PAR). We obtained data from project documentation, field observations, stakeholder interviews, and cultural mapping. The objective was to examine the significance of methods such as storytelling, creative festivals, and cultural incubators in transforming the cultural capital of participating communities.

The research encompassed eight university-led projects:

    I.   Strengthening the Grassroots Economy and Competitiveness for Cultural Capital Communities in Khemmarat and Na Tan Districts, Ubon Ratchathani Province – Ubon Ratchathani University

   II.   Mae Chaem: Creative Cultural City Project – Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna

  III.   Promoting a Creative Cultural Park for the Development of Pattani Cultural Capital Communities – Prince of Songkla University Pattani Campus

  IV.   Cultural Capital Management Project with the 4th Mission of the University of Phayao to Enhance the Local Economy Community and Local Awareness of the Cultural Community of Kwan Phayao Terrace – University of Phayao

   V.   Hat Yai City's Auspicious Ways Project Based on Cultural Capital for Creative Economy Development – Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus

  VI.   Nong Kae Dam Arts and Culture Group Project – Maha Sarakham University

 VII.   Innovative Art and Faith Project: Supporting the Economy and Preserving Local Areas of Sam Bang, Two Sides of the Canal, Samut Prakan Province – Huachiew Chalermprakiet University

VIII.   Cultural Capital Management Project to Enhance the Community Economy through the Legend of Phimai – Rajamangala University of Technology Esan

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*
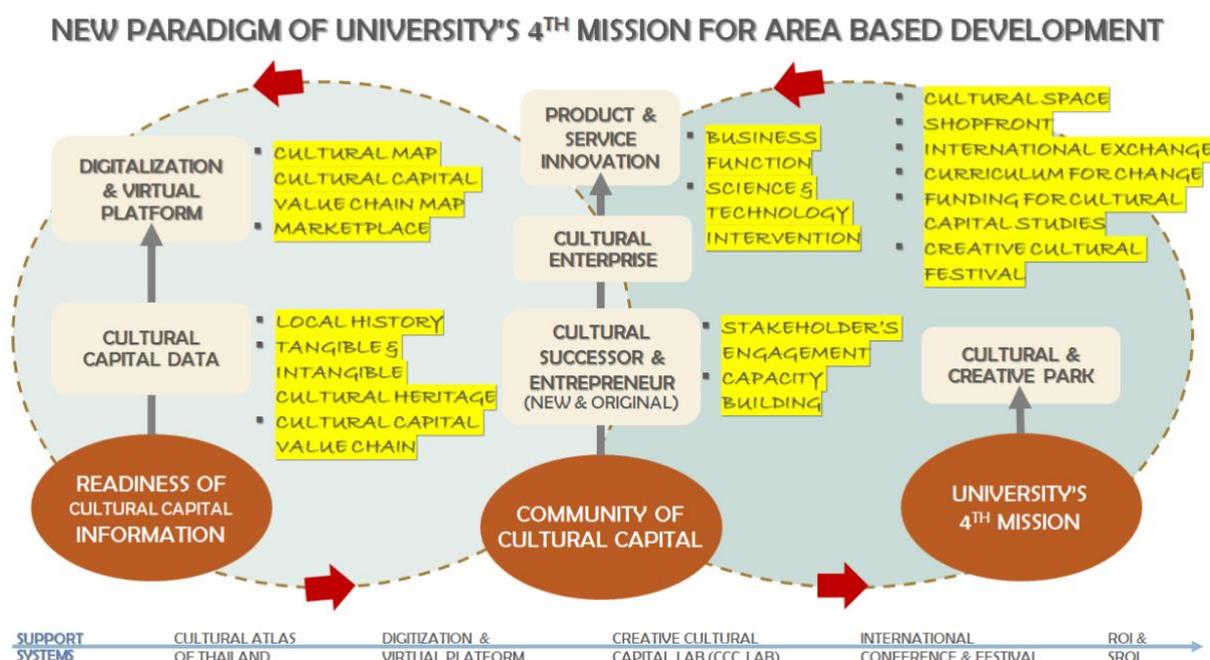


The university plays a crucial role in collaborating with network partners and stakeholders to acquire and enhance the value of cultural capital in the academic disciplines. The initial step in this approach involves collecting extensive information, including study on local history, cultural heritage, and pieces of cultural capital that may aid in defining and reinforcing local identity. Cultural mapping and value chain mapping are two methodologies employed for an in-depth investigation of the cultural capital value chain. These procedures culminate in the generation of "cultural capital information" that is archived on a digital platform.

The university utilizes its resources to assist local artists, crafters, and both emerging and established cultural entrepreneurs in enhancing their skills. It also facilitates the cultivation of cultural successors and the establishment of cultural enterprises. Universities foster collaborative frameworks that enhance entrepreneurial potential via the Cultural Capital Community, comprising government entities, private sector companies, artists, and civil society organizations. We employ scientific knowledge, advanced technologies, and interdisciplinary experience to enhance cultural goods and services.

The Cultural Capital Community has transformed the university's approach to its fourth mission: the preservation of arts and culture. This is due to the enhancement of the appreciation for local cultural capital. In response to this development, colleges have established designated zones for cultural capital, referred to as "Creative Cultural Parks." These parks serve as cultural centers operated by universities. They offer venues for the sale of cultural goods and services, facilitate the dissemination of knowledge regarding the enhancement of cultural capital, and promote collaboration between local cultural communities and global networks. They also organize academic activities focused on cultural transformation, provide research grants or scholarships for the advancement of cultural capital, and facilitate creative cultural festivals that foster local pride and collective consciousness.

This developmental mechanism facilitates economic growth at the community level and enhances the integration of supply chains into broader value chains. The project advocates equitable income distribution and sustainable employment possibilities by leveraging local resources, culture, and traditional knowledge as its primary assets. This represents a novel perspective on Mission 4—Preservation of Arts and Culture—in the higher education system of Thailand.

Cultural capital refers to the cultural assets transmitted from one generation to another by social practices and lifestyles. Handcrafted objects, artworks, sculptures, historical landmarks, antiquities, and vernacular architecture exemplify tangible cultural capital. Traditions, ceremonies, folk performing arts, and local music exemplify intangible cultural capital. Legends, narratives, and customs vary significantly across many locales, ranging from neighborhoods and villages to sub-districts, districts, provinces, and regions.

## Results

The institution has meticulously curated and disseminated the information gathered during the research process to generate accessible cultural capital data. This encompasses comprehensive and specific datasets regarding local history, encompassing both tangible and intangible cultural assets, cultural capital value chains, and the digitization and exhibition of cultural mapping data on a digital platform.

A network-based framework must be established to facilitate local growth, involving government agencies, enterprises, and civil society organizations. These groups are essential for sustaining culturally capital-driven development following the conclusion of the study endeavor. Universities and academics ought to continue providing academic services, orchestrating cultural events, and advocating for local goods, services, and cultural venues. Government agencies can ensure the continuity of these programs by signing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or formulating area development plans grounded in cultural capital. They can subsequently incorporate them into their annual operational plans and allocate the necessary resources.

## Developing Cultural Entrepreneurs and Cultural Enterprises

All participating colleges concentrate on enhancing individuals' talents via training programs, cultivating entrepreneurial abilities, conducting field visits, and exchanging expertise with other cultural and external entrepreneurs to generate innovations. Examples include collaborating with designers to create a cultural entrepreneurship handbook, establishing design institutions such as the Patanista Academy, and initiating the Pattani Creative Economy Cluster at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus. Cultural businesses are emerging from entrepreneurial networks, while established cultural enterprise organizations are amalgamating to enhance their strength and focus. The "Suvarnabhumi Local Cultural Community Enterprise Network" at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University exemplifies this initiative.

Research and development span the complete supply chain, comprising upstream, midstream, and downstream parts. The Advance Track research framework primarily examines post-sale activities, such as service promotion. These activities encompass attending events, establishing trade displays, and doing internet sales. They also encompass the assembly of cultural products at the CCX store located in the Luen Rit Community on Yaowarat Road in Bangkok. We are developing a catalog to promote cultural products in both Thai and English.

Woven textiles transformed into apparel, purses, souvenirs, and home decor exemplify cultural products derived from local cultural capital. Utilizing bamboo, sedge, and pandanus for weaving produces furniture, household goods, souvenirs, and ceremonial offerings like as the Luang Pu Choi turtle. Decorative tiles from temples and Buddhist art exemplify craftsmanship.

The study concentrates on the 5Fs—Food, Film and Video, Fashion (including Thai fashion design), Fighting (traditional martial arts), and Festivals—due to their alignment with the government's soft power strategy and the objective of enhancing Thai identity within the creative cultural sector. Fashion is a vital consideration on this list. Clothing is a fundamental human necessity that individuals have crafted and refined for specific events throughout their lives. Women in multi-ethnic communities have acquired the skill of weaving from their mothers and grandmothers. They initially created items for personal use and subsequently transformed them into enterprises. This aspect of culture is significant; nonetheless, the contemporary market demands innovative design and superior tailoring that preserves local uniqueness while enhancing economic value.

Local cuisine groups, performing arts collectives, musical ensembles, costume rental enterprises, and cultural tourism associations that serve tourists and visitors exemplify cultural services that have emerged from local cultural capital to generate revenue. The Chatri theater from Huachiew Chalermprakiet University and the Mu and Tuk Tuk cultural tourism routes exemplify commendable initiatives. Over 200 cultural items and services have emerged from the Hat Yai Campus of Prince of Songkla University.

All eight institutions continue to engage in research initiatives that further purpose 4— Preserving Arts and Culture—while concurrently integrating this purpose with the other three basic missions and contributing to local economic development. A notable alteration in university policy indicates a growing comprehension of Mission 4 in a more expansive context, extending beyond conventional festivities such as Loy Krathong, Songkran, New Year's almsgiving, and cultural exhibitions for certain occasions. The research initiatives in the Advance Track program compel researchers to develop methodologies grounded in cultural

capital. Researchers spearheading this initiative conduct iterative experiments and refine their methodologies while collaborating closely with the national coordination team and the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) to yield additional research outcomes and develop new research themes for the "Open Call" and "TACITS" programs each fiscal year. Universities can now leverage their knowledge and resources to contribute to society in more significant ways beyond just entertainment.

The University of Phayao exemplifies the implementation of Mission 4. They have utilized the conceptual framework from the first project to formulate an action plan that integrates the preservation of arts and culture with educational instruction, student development initiatives, and academic services across all their institutions and faculties. The Eastern Lanna Arts and Culture Center and the Institute for Innovative Learning have included this paradigm into their strategic plans. At Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, the Vice President serves as the highest-ranking administrator and project leader. This individual facilitates collaboration among individuals from various faculties, offices, institutes, and units. The project framework comprises sub-projects aligned with the primary objectives and performance metrics. Assisted by senior executives, the research process engages a diverse array of university personnel and consolidates input from several departments to enhance the cultivation and dissemination of cultural capital. Ubon Ratchathani University invests significant effort in researching cultural capital for local development. Multiple research teams have been authorized for participation in both the Advance Track program and the Open Call initiative. The research conducted in Khemmarat District has garnered recognition in Thailand and globally.

**Creative Cultural Parks as a New Institutional Model**

The establishment of Creative Cultural Parks at all eight universities, both on campus and in research zones, represents an innovative approach in Thai higher education. These parks are intended to serve as venues for the convergence of culture, economic activity, and community development.

Among their most significant characteristics are:
1. Integration: Consolidating artistic, cultural, and creative business endeavors into a unified framework.
2. Innovation: These are environments where individuals collaborate, experiment, and cultivate novel cultures.
3. Sustainability: Promoting cultural innovation to facilitate the development of "Cultural Cities" at the provincial or local tier.

Creative Cultural Parks function as Living Cultural Labs, serving as dynamic environments where tradition and creativity converge, facilitating knowledge generation, employment opportunities, and cultural identity.

**Case Study: Pattani Creative Cultural Park**

The Pattani Creative Cultural Park, operated by Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, serves as an exemplary model. It is located in the cosmopolitan southern area of Thailand. Pattani is frequently perceived as a region marked by social turmoil; however, this project emphasizes cultural capital as a means to engage diverse communities. The project employs Thai, Chinese, and Malay cultural capital to revitalize the neighborhood. The activities include creative festivals and exhibitions, workshops on crafting new textiles, and assisting individuals

in establishing their own cultural enterprises. These initiatives have transformed the park into a hub for cultural rejuvenation and economic development. Artisans can now produce innovative items, ranging from jewelry and traditional fabrics to local food products, all of which integrate tradition with contemporary concepts.

The operations of the Creative Cultural Park have also given rise to the Creative Culture Festival. These festivals, conducted through partnerships and community-led initiatives, fall into five formats:

I. City festivals showcasing cultural expression and fostering social cohesion among people of all ages and backgrounds
II. Festivals that continue or innovatively reinterpret local traditions
III. Festivals aimed at supporting the creative economy, tourism, and the sale of cultural products and services
IV. Festivals that highlight the value of local cultural capital, providing a platform for demonstration and cultural transmission
V. Festivals that build networks for future collaboration in cultural development

## Discussion

### Success in Becoming a "Proactive Change Leader" Through Co-creation

The findings indicate a significant transformation in the university's role; it has evolved from primarily being a "guardian" of culture to becoming an active "co-creator." The research team has operated as a "knowledge broker," effectively integrating academic expertise in design, marketing, and innovation with indigenous knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Evidence-based indicators demonstrate this transformation: the co-creation of more than 200 cultural products and services serves as definitive proof of collaborative innovation and illustrates the monetization of information generated at universities.

### Driving the Grassroots Economy and Impact-Based Development

The Creative Cultural Park serves as an economic hub that leverages culture to enhance individual well-being and bolster local economies.

Quantitative indicators include:
- **Job Creation and Incubation:** Support for over 100 new entrepreneurs, artists, craftsmen, and cultural entrepreneurs reflects deliberate investment in fostering career pathways grounded in cultural capital.
- **Economic Return:** A 15% increase in average community income reinforces the positive correlation between cultural capital management and local economic development. Additionally, the use of creative cultural festivals as mechanisms for attracting both direct and indirect beneficiaries demonstrates that cultural spaces and activities can evolve into creative tourism destinations that stimulate broader economic growth (Richards, 2001).

### Social Impact and Local Consciousness Building

Beyond economic outcomes, the project has generated substantial social impacts, particularly in relation to local consciousness and social capital (Putnam, 1995).

I.  Empowerment and Ownership:
    The PAR process empowers community members by fostering pride in their cultural heritage and enabling them to "own their development trajectory." Co-creation processes contribute to sustainable community empowerment.
II. Multicultural Society Management:
    Creative Cultural Parks serve as inclusive spaces that encourage social cohesion among diverse cultural groups. Collaborative exploration and reinterpretation of cultural values help reduce social tensions and cultivate an environment in which people of different backgrounds can coexist harmoniously.
III. Generational Succession:
    The transmission of cultural values—expressed through products or experiential activities—constitutes a dynamic and economically meaningful mechanism for passing knowledge and wisdom to younger generations.

## Conclusion

The outcomes have been exceptional at all eight universities. Over 200 new cultural products and services were developed with the assistance of local communities, and more than 100 new cultural entrepreneurs established their own enterprises through university-led incubation programs. The mean augmentation in household income for participating localities was 15%. The essential effect, however, is the empowerment of community people. They have restored pride in their cultural identity and now perceive culture not as a static heritage, but as a dynamic and living asset.

The results indicate that colleges are evolving from institutions of individual learning to collaborative environments for collective learning. This is a summary of their new responsibilities under Mission 4:
I.  Cultural Knowledge Managers: Universities are currently engaged in the research, documentation, and innovative application of local cultural capital.
II. Cultural Incubators: These are venues where cultural entrepreneurs can acquire knowledge and develop, resulting in innovative concepts rooted in local heritage.
III. Human Capital Developers: They educate a new cohort of Cultural Resource Managers—experts capable of sustaining the creative economy by harmonizing tradition with innovation.

This alteration signifies a significant transformation in perspective: from "preserving history" to "shaping the future through culture." This analysis further confirms that the creation of a Creative Cultural Park under university leadership is the most effective approach for transforming Mission 4 into a driver of sustainable development. Universities have demonstrated their capacity as local change agents by enhancing the local economy (evidenced by a 15 percent increase in income) and improving local consciousness (characterized by increased ownership and enhanced intercultural coexistence). These achievements stem from the application of PAR methodology and the essential function of co-creation throughout the research process.

This report proposes five primary policy directions to ensure long-term sustainability. Incorporate cultural capital into national development strategies, particularly within the BCG and Creative Economy frameworks.
I.  Establish Cultural Management Units (CMUs) in colleges and universities to strategize and sustain cultural programs.

II.   Establish a national cultural data platform to facilitate information sharing and policy planning.
III.  Establish sustainable funding mechanisms that extend beyond a single year and enhance the robustness of Cultural Incubators for emerging entrepreneurs.
IV.   Develop new human capital by establishing programs for Cultural Resource Managers capable of integrating creativity, academia, and local development.

**Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

The authors used an artificial intelligence system (ChatGPT) to support the structuring of the article, the refinement of language, and the checking of logical coherence. All analyses, interpretations, and scholarly arguments presented in this paper are the authors' own.

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