

Driving Creative Economy Through Likay Performing Arts: Integrating Product Innovation and City Learning Ecology in Ang Thong Province, Thailand

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Abstract

This research aims to study and analyze approaches for transforming cultural capital from “Likay” performing arts into creative commercial products to enhance the grassroots economy and develop a City Learning Ecology that supports lifelong learning for all ages. Using Ang Thong Province—the “Likay Capital of Thailand”—as a case study, the study employs a Mixed Methods Research design, primarily focusing on Qualitative Research and Participatory Action Research (PAR). The findings reveal that the most effective concept for creating cultural-based products is the development of “Likay Models.” These consist of five designs of toys and souvenirs that deconstruct and redesign the diverse identities and intricate costumes of Likay characters to communicate cultural values to the younger generation. Economic valuation indicates that these products generate significant circulating income, with a Return on Investment (ROI) as high as 5.66. Key findings suggest that the success of creative cultural products relies on a robust City Learning Ecology. This mechanism integrates a network of master artists and three generations of Likay performers (children, youth, and elders) with entrepreneurs and stakeholders. Such synergy ensures the systematic transmission of traditional wisdom alongside innovation. This approach not only addresses management challenges within small-scale cultural businesses but also fosters local identity pride and promotes the global sustainability of Likay performing arts through creative economy mechanisms.

Keywords: Likay, creative products, city learning ecology, Ang Thong Province, Participatory Action Research (PAR)

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Introduction

Thailand is strategically pivoting towards a value-based economy, guided by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 20-year National Strategy (2018–2037). Within this framework, cultural capital is prioritized as a dynamic engine for local economic revitalization. A prominent example is Ang Thong Province, the “Likay Capital of Thailand,” which possesses a rich “Living Heritage”, the professional performing arts. However, the province faces a significant “pain point”: a lack of systematic integration between cultural preservation and economic viability. Tourism revenue remains below its potential, and family-run cultural businesses often lack professional management. Furthermore, there is a visible gap in knowledge transmission to younger generations, threatening the sustainability of Likay as a living art form.

To address these challenges, this research proposes a comprehensive framework centered on the City Learning Ecology. Based on the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) criteria, this ecology promotes lifelong learning to empower individuals and drive economic development. In Ang Thong, this is operationalized through the “Likay 3 Generations” model, which connects elderly masters (Wai Duek), youth (Wai Dan), and students (Wai Dek). Crucially, the study integrates Product Innovation as a commercial bridge. By developing “Likay Models”—collectible figures based on iconic stage characters—the project transforms intangible heritage into tangible products that appeal to modern audiences. Through Participatory Action Research (PAR), this study engages over 55 stakeholders to ensure that these innovations support a robust, grassroots creative economy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a Mixed Methods Research design, primarily integrated through Qualitative Research and Participatory Action Research (PAR). The methodology is designed to be transparent and reproducible to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The research process is divided into three distinct phases as follows:

Phase 1: Contextual and Potential Analysis

The objective of this phase is to analyze the cultural and historical potential of Ang Thong Province as a foundation for a learning city.

- **Documentary Research:** A systematic review was conducted on national policies, the 20-year National Strategy, provincial development plans, and relevant academic reports to establish a conceptual framework. Data was processed using Content Analysis to categorize the economic and social value of local cultural capital.
- **Area Frame Survey and Participant Observation:** The research team conducted on-site surveys at key locations, including the various Likay performance sites. Researchers engaged in participant observation to record community interactions and the existing use of learning spaces.
- **In-Depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 55 key informants, including master artists (e.g., the President of the Likay Association of Thailand), local government officials, community leaders, and professional performers.

Phase 2: City Learning Ecology Development

This phase focuses on creating mechanisms for lifelong learning and enhancing creative products through a collaborative PAR process.

- **Participatory Action Research (PAR):** The process followed a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. This included:
 - Focus Groups:** Two rounds of stakeholder meetings were held to co-design action plans and define success indicators for the “Likay 3 Generations” model.
 - Creative Workshops:** Collaborative sessions were held to develop Product Innovations, such as the five “Likay Figures” (collectible models).
 - Curriculum Development:** The research team worked with local schools (e.g., Wat Sa Kao School) and the College of Dramatic Arts to institutionalize Likay knowledge into a “Likay Lifelong Learning Curriculum” and an online course titled “Likay Appreciation” via SU4Life, Silpakorn University.

Phase 3: Collaborative Mechanism Establishment

The final phase aims to ensure sustainability through a Quadruple Helix Model (Academia, Government, Private Sector, and Community).

- **MOU and Policy Integration:** A formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established between Silpakorn University and Ang Thong Province.
- **Strategic Planning:** Findings were integrated into the Ang Thong Provincial 20-Year Development Plan (2023–2042) to secure long-term budget and personnel support, facilitating the province’s application to the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC).

Data Validation and Analysis

- **Triangulation:** To minimize bias and ensure accuracy, the study utilized Data Triangulation (verifying sources across different times, places, and persons), Theory Triangulation, and Methodological Triangulation.
- **Analytic Techniques:** Qualitative data from interviews and field notes were analyzed using Discourse Analysis and Content Analysis to interpret the socio-cultural behaviors and narratives of the community

Results and Discussion

Results

Development of the 5 Likay Archetype Models

The study successfully transformed the intangible cultural heritage of Ang Thong's Likay into tangible assets through the creation of five distinct figure models. These figures serve as a knowledge base to communicate traditional character identities to the younger generation. The series consists of three female and two male characters, each designed with costumes and gestures that reflect specific Likay performance archetypes:

- **Model 1 – Phra Ek (The Leading Male):** Represents a gentle, polite, and kind personality, characterized by an affectionate stage persona.
- **Model 2 – Male Joker (Tua Jok Chai):** Portrays a fun, outspoken, and detached character who acts as a crucial assistant in various scenarios.

- **Model 3** – Nang Rai (The Villainess): Reflects a competitive and risk-taking spirit, embodying a character that never surrenders.
- **Model 4** – Female Joker (Tua Jok Ying): Similar to the male joker, this archetype provides humor and aids in problem-solving through a fun and outspoken demeanor.
- **Model 5** – Nang Ek (The Leading Female): Portrayed as a gentle, polite, and delicate character, evoking a sense of fragility.

To protect these creative assets, the research team has secured intellectual property rights by applying for design patents (Nos. 2602000119–2602000123).

The “Blind Box” Marketing Strategy

To bridge the gap between traditional heritage and modern consumer trends, the project implemented a “Blind Box” strategy. This approach leverages the element of surprise to stimulate interest and encourage collecting behavior among Thai. By utilizing these figures for role-play, the strategy facilitates a deeper engagement with Likay narratives and cultural identities, effectively making the art form more accessible and “trendy” for contemporary audiences.

Economic Valuation and ROI

The economic impact analysis indicates significant potential for circulating income within the local community. Based on a production target of 10,000 units, the financial assessment demonstrates an exceptional Return on Investment (ROI) of 5.66 times.

Table 1

Estimated Economic Value and ROI Analysis for Likay Models

Assessment Item	Quantitative Details	Value (THB)
Total Investment	Research, design, production, and marketing	300,000
Production Cost per Unit	Averaged over 10,000 units	30
Retail Price per Unit	Target selling price for toys/souvenirs	200
Profit per Unit	Net gain after deducting production costs	170
Total Estimated Value/Profit	Total return from 10,000 units	1,700,000
Return on Investment (ROI)	Ratio of benefit to cost	5.66

Discussion

Cultural Capital as an Economic Driver

The results demonstrate that the “Likay Models” effectively address the province's primary pain point: the imbalance between cultural “value” and economic “volume”. By deconstructing intricate stage identities into collectible figures, the research proves that traditional arts can be revitalized as creative commercial products that appeal to younger demographics.

Strengthening the City Learning Ecology

The success of these products is not isolated but is a result of a robust City Learning Ecology. This ecology integrates three generations—Wai Dek (Children), Wai Dan (Youth), and Wai

Duek (Elders)—with local stakeholders. Likay figures are more than just toys; they are learning tools for lifelong cultural transmission.

Managerial and Policy Implications

The high ROI of 5.66 serves as a powerful indicator for policy-makers to integrate cultural innovation into provincial development plans. Moving from a traditional family-run model to a “Creative Enterprise” requires systematic management and digital marketing skills, which this project provides through a “Learn-to-Earn” framework. Ultimately, this model supports Ang Thong’s ambition to join the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), proving that local identity can be scaled into a sustainable international brand

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the strategic integration of product innovation and a robust City Learning Ecology serves as a transformative engine for the creative economy in Ang Thong Province. By deconstructing the intangible cultural heritage of Likay into tangible assets—such as the five archetype collectible figures—the project successfully bridges the gap between traditional “value” and modern economic “volume”. The economic valuation, yielding a Return on Investment (ROI) of 5.66 times, underscores the potential of cultural capital to drive circulating income within the grassroots economy.

The core mechanism for sustainability is the “Likay 3 Generations” model, which facilitates a seamless flow of knowledge from elderly (Wai Duek) to youth (Wai Dan) and students (Wai Dek). This model not only ensures cultural preservation but also promotes social well-being and lifelong learning, positioning Ang Thong as a prominent candidate for the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC). Ultimately, Ang Thong’s Likay has evolved from a static folk performance into a dynamic “Living Heritage” that integrates artistic identity with innovative commercial potential.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure the long-term sustainability of Ang Thong as a creative learning city, the following policy measures are recommended:

Establishment of a “Likay Creative District”

Local government units should implement cultural zoning to create a dedicated creative district. This area should serve as a Living Museum and a central marketplace where innovative cultural products (e.g., Likay-themed food, fashion, and souvenirs) can be showcased to attract international tourists and researchers.

Institutionalization of the Cultural Curriculum

The “Likay Lifelong Learning Curriculum” and the “Likay 3 Generations” model should be formally integrated into the provincial education system. By embedding local wisdom into school courses, the province can foster “Cultural Citizens” who possess both an appreciation for their roots and the innovative skills to drive future creative industries.

Strengthening Multi-sectoral Collaboration (Quadruple Helix)

The collaboration between academia, government, the private sector, and the community—formalized through the existing MOU with Silpakorn University—must be maintained. Policy-makers should ensure that the “Learning City” concept remains a core component of the Ang Thong 20-Year Provincial Development Plan to secure continuous budgetary and personnel support.

Digital Transformation and Global Branding

Policies should support the continuous development of a Digital Archive for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and the promotion of Multilingual Likay (English and German versions). Leveraging social media platforms and digital storytelling will enhance Thailand’s Soft Power and establish an international brand identity for Ang Thong on the global stage.

Promoting Social Well-being Through Art Therapy

The “Likay Wai Duek” model should be expanded as a state-supported initiative for social healing and art therapy for the elderly. Utilizing Likay as a tool for mental and social well-being will address the challenges of an aging society while empowering seniors to remain active contributors to the community's cultural ecosystem.

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