

Cultural Mapping Based on Community Capitals for Participatory Governance of Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Sukhothai, Thailand

Punjaphut Thirathamrongwee¹, Watcharaphong Chumduang^{2,*} and Nuchjarin Sriwiset³

¹Department of Interior Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

²Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand

³Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand

(*Corresponding author's e-mail: watcharapong.c@cmu.ac.th)

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Abstract

This article addresses the challenge of top-down intangible heritage management in Sukhothai, Thailand, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Creative Cities Network member. It examines Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) through the Community Capitals Framework (CCF), focusing on cultural, human, social, financial, and built capitals. The study draws on qualitative fieldwork in four key communities along the Phra Ruang corridor in Sukhothai Province and is based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Findings identify three linked patterns. First, cultural capital and built capital serve as the operational base of ICH, allowing cultural practices and ritual traditions to remain active in communities. Second, human capital and social capital enhance the quality and continuity of transmission through intergenerational teaching and locally rooted learning networks. Third, visible outcomes in learning, livelihood, and local recognition of ICH assets attract financial support and policy attention. On this basis, the study develops a community capital map through participatory discussion with community leaders. The map makes local assets visible, allows communities to compare and reflect on their own and others' strengths, and helps set shared development priorities. This process provides an applied basis for participatory heritage management and for community-based heritage governance in Sukhothai.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage, Community capitals framework, Participatory heritage management, Community-based heritage governance, Sukhothai

Introduction

Sukhothai Province, located in lower northern Thailand, is internationally recognized as a heritage landscape. It is renowned for its archaeological sites and the material traces of an early Thai polity during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a period when Sukhothai functioned as a political, religious, and cultural center. The historical city is celebrated for its urban layout, hydraulic infrastructure, and distinctive artistic production. Sukhothai was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1991 and was later designated a UNESCO Creative City for Crafts and Folk Art in 2019 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.; UNESCO, n.d.).

State-led agendas and expert-driven interpretations largely frame local heritage governance in Sukhothai, despite its global recognition. Community actors are frequently positioned as informants or periodic participants rather than as co-authors of the value, meaning, and future direction for their heritage. Previous studies have noted persistent tensions between centrally defined policies and the lived cultural dynamics of specific localities, including the impacts of physical transformations that may threaten community-defined cultural values (Chumduang, 2024; Esichaikul & Chansawang, 2022; King & Parnwell, 2011; Usaard et al., 2025). These tensions highlight the structural

limitations of a predominantly top-down approach, in which community engagement often remains tokenistic and the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of communities is treated as supplementary rather than foundational (Alivizatou, 2021). Consequently, state-led heritage management is frequently misaligned with the realities of place, including available resources, funding, and culturally embedded support systems (Smith, 2006), even as contemporary heritage practice increasingly calls for a value-based approach where communities themselves define and safeguard the values of their heritage (De La Torre, 2013).

This study addresses two interrelated research questions. First, how do communities articulate and mobilize their unique forms of community capital and ICH assets, and in what ways do these converge or diverge across different local contexts? Second, through which mechanisms are these capitals activated, transmitted, and translated into usable tools for shared learning? To answer these questions, the study operationalizes the Community Capitals Framework (CCF), developed by Emery and Flora (2006), as an analytical lens to examine how diverse, locally situated capitals are interconnected and mobilized. In doing so, this article advances a community-led heritage governance perspective, treating communities not as passive recipients but as active knowledge holders and stewards of their own cultural futures. The argument is situated within ongoing debates on sustainable development, emphasizing that community-defined value and collective stewardship are critical foundations for heritage governance aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Background

Structural limitations of top-down heritage governance models

While heritage management is often framed by state policies and international bodies like UNESCO, a significant body of scholarship has critiqued the limitations of centralized (top-down) governance models that privilege expert knowledge over local community perspectives (Boland et al., 2023; Logan, 2012; Marsland, 2011; Miura, 2022). Such approaches tend to reduce communities to the role of passive spectators or beneficiaries, excluding them from the processes of meaning-making and heritage

interpretation. As a result, communities that don't have formal policy recognition often have to make do with what little help they get from the state (Araoz, 2011; García-Mieres et al., 2024; Harrison, 2012; Larsen, 2017). When policy agendas are deployed to define heritage according to state narratives or the demands of the tourism industry, vulnerable forms of heritage, those at risk of being lost or devalued, may be neglected or selectively promoted only for their market potential (Salazar, 2011; Smith & Akagawa, 2008). This runs counter to the inherently dynamic nature of ICH, which depends on continuous, community-based knowledge transmission for its vitality (Hafstein, 2008).

This state-centric management, often described through the concept of an Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith, 2006), tends to overlook locally embedded assets, including social and human capital, thereby fixing heritage and stripping it of its capacity to adapt to new contexts (Deacon et al., 2004). Moreover, governance approaches driven by external policy frameworks frequently fail to reflect the heterogeneity of local conditions (Thouki & Skrede, 2024). Ultimately, this can lead to imbalanced development and contradict principles of governance pluralism, which call for a diversity of community voices in conservation processes (Byrne, 2014; Waterton & Smith, 2010). Such misalignment with community resources and mechanisms erodes local cultural identity and hinders pathways toward sustainable community development (Askew, 2010; Vecco, 2010; Waterton & Watson, 2013; Zhu & Martínez, 2021).

In response, alternative concepts such as shared stewardship and participatory governance have been proposed to rebalance the relationship among the state, experts, and communities. Within these frameworks, communities are not viewed as objects of management but as dignified authors of their heritage futures (Siririsak & Akagawa, 2012). Furthermore, community participation itself must be redesigned to be articulated equitably with cultural capital. This reframes participation not as a mere technical procedure but as an ethical commitment to recognizing and respecting community agency (Uribe-Chinen, 2024; Witchayakawin et al., 2022).

Intangible cultural heritage as cultural knowledge in development discourse

In recent decades, the discourse on ICH has increasingly shifted from viewing it as static rituals or performances in need of preservation toward understanding it as a dynamic, living cultural knowledge system. Framing ICH in this way illuminates its role as a mechanism for knowledge generation, resource management, and intergenerational identity transmission, particularly in contexts of rapid societal change (Kosmidou & McMurtry, 2025; Kurin, 2004; UNESCO, 2024).

This conceptual shift resonates with the broadening scope of sustainable development, which now extends beyond economic growth to encompass community agency, the capacity of people to shape their life pathways through cultural capital, learning, and local epistemologies. The recent UNESCO Global Report (Wulf, 2024) emphasizes that ICH is essential for protecting cultural diversity, supporting culture-based livelihoods, and building community resilience, all of which are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This has led to calls for assessing its multidimensional values and developing indicators to inform more balanced policy decisions that navigate between conservation and development objectives (Nocca, 2017).

In a related vein, scholars have argued that conceptualizing ICH as both embodied knowledge and a constituent element of cultural capital can enable more meaningful policy linkages between community knowledge and development processes (Labadi, 2012). This perspective underpins calls for a knowledge-based cultural policy that protects heritage and empowers communities to learn from, adapt, and innovate upon their knowledge systems for their futures. Bouchenaki (2003), for instance, argued for an integrated approach that considers tangible heritage (e.g., historic buildings) and intangible heritage (e.g., community beliefs and lifeways) as inextricably linked within the same socio-spatial context. This holistic perspective paves the way for viewing ICH not as a separate category but as a form of community capital itself, a conceptualization well-suited to ICH due to its inherent flexibility and adaptability to changing social contexts.

Community Capitals Framework as an Analytical Approach to Intangible Cultural Heritage

The CCF identifies various types of capital that contribute to a community's capacity for development. The framework delineates seven key capitals: (1) Cultural Capital, encompassing language, beliefs, traditions, and local knowledge systems; (2) Natural Capital, such as land, water, forests, and topography; (3) Human Capital, including the education, health, and skills of the population; (4) Social Capital, which covers networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity; (5) Political Capital, representing the ability to access power and influence policy; (6) Financial Capital, such as community financial assets and access to external funding; and (7) Built Capital, which includes infrastructure, buildings, and public utilities.

A central premise of the CCF is that the assets nurturing a community are not limited to economic resources or physical structures but crucially include intangible assets like cultural capital. When nurtured, these capitals can produce a spiraling-up effect, wherein investments in one domain stimulate expansion in others; for example, enhancing cultural capital can promote local pride (social capital) and generate new economic opportunities (financial capital). This interconnectedness is a critical mechanism for a community's ability to maintain, transmit, and adapt its ICH.

In the study of ICH, the CCF has proven to be an effective analytical framework for linking cultural assets to development potential, particularly through participatory learning and community-driven initiatives that can stimulate synergistic growth across other capitals, such as in creative tourism (Carvalho et al., 2024; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025). Research by Gutierrez-Montes et al. (2009), for example, demonstrates that the CCF provides a more profound understanding of internal community dynamics, especially in contexts aiming to revitalize cultural capital for sustainable social and economic resilience.

Within the field of heritage studies, and particularly for ICH, the CCF provides a lens for viewing heritage not as a static object but as a dynamic product of intersecting capitals, necessitating an analysis of their interplay. For example, cultural capital acts as the repository of local knowledge, values, and specialized skills, while social capital provides the channels for the transmission, communication, and negotiation of heritage meaning. The framework thus

helps to explain why a community, despite possessing robust cultural capital, may struggle to sustain its ICH if it lacks other crucial assets, such as political capital (to influence policy) or human capital (to engage with contemporary knowledge management).

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on four communities in Sukhothai Province, each possessing distinct ICH profiles. These communities vary in their ecological resources, settlement histories, and modes of local knowledge transmission, with each emphasizing different capitals, such as natural capital (forest/water resources), human capital (local wisdom), or cultural capital (crafts, traditions). The study is grounded in a community-based inquiry methodology and utilizes the CCF as an analytical lens to investigate how cultural knowledge is embedded, transmitted, and adapted within the broader system of community capitals.

Site selection was conducted using purposive sampling based on criteria that reflect the diverse dynamics of community capital management. A key variable was the communities' proximity to the historical parks, a factor influencing their access to tourists, external resources, and degree of self-reliance. This comparative approach was designed to systematically analyze the potential of community capital to enable sustainable heritage management. The sites were organized into three geographical groups:

Area 1: A community adjacent to the Si Satchanalai Historical Park: Ban Ta Chai Community, which exhibits high potential for cultural development but currently lacks mechanisms to connect its internal assets.

Area 2: Communities within the Mueang Kao (Old City) district: Covering 12 settlements near the Sukhothai Historical Park, these communities possess strong symbolic capital and high accessibility for tourists.

Area 3: Communities distant from the historical parks but with robust, internally sustained cultural capital: Ban Na Ton Chan and Ban Thung Luang, which rely heavily on self-governance and internal capital mobilization.

This tripartite grouping allows for a comparative analysis of how communities manage their capitals,

contrasting varying levels of external opportunity with internal capacity. It addresses the central research question of how community assets and heritage can serve as a basis for sustainable and participatory governance.

Data was collected over a one-year period across all four communities. Participants included community leaders, key actors involved in local management, and a broader sample of approximately 90 residents per community. All data were gathered via audio recordings and field notes, with formal consent obtained from all participants. The following methods were used:

1) Community Capital Survey: A preliminary survey was used as an initial tool to assess the general profile of the seven capitals according to the CCF and to gauge community awareness of their existing assets. This informed the development of in-depth questions for key informants.

2) Semi-structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with artisans, community leaders, elders, and youth to gather in-depth accounts of heritage in daily life, knowledge transmission, and the interplay between different capitals.

3) Focus Group Discussions: These were held with local wisdom keepers and knowledge successors to exchange perspectives and cross-validate the meanings that communities attribute to their cultural capital.

4) Participatory Community Capital Mapping: This collaborative exercise was conducted with community members to visualize the seven capitals spatially, document their changes over time, and analyze the relationships between physical, social, and cultural assets.

The collected data are screened through the Community Capitals Framework in order to identify high-potential forms of ICH and their operative governance mechanisms and to derive practicable management guidelines that can support sustainable, community-led administration in subsequent phases.

Understanding Sukhothai as a living cultural heritage landscape through 4 key communities

This Sukhothai is both a historical territory and a living heritage landscape, animated through the lifeways, beliefs, traditions, crafts, Buddhist artistry, and symbolic spaces that continuously shape the local cultural fabric (Singtuen et al., 2024; Thiagarajan, 2024;

Wisetchat, 2013). At the core of this cultural capital is the Phra Ruang narrative, which transcends the figure of a chronicle king to become a central axis of local folklore. This legend cycle, recounting the supernatural exploits of Phra Ruang, remains deeply embedded in collective memory, ritual practices, material culture, and the use of space to this day (Department of Fine Arts, 2012; Sukkham, 2017; Wisudthiluck, 2022).

This belief system is geographically anchored to the historical route connecting the Si Satchanalai,

Sukhothai, and Kamphaeng Phet historical parks (from north to south), known as the Phra Ruang Road (Figure 1). Currently, the Phra Ruang legend manifests as a form of cultural tourism capital, appearing in diverse forms such as souvenirs, cultural events, and culinary offerings (Arkarapoti Wong et al., 2020; Chumduang, 2021; Eat, 2024; Kangkhao, 2020; Lertcharnrit & Niyomsap, 2020).

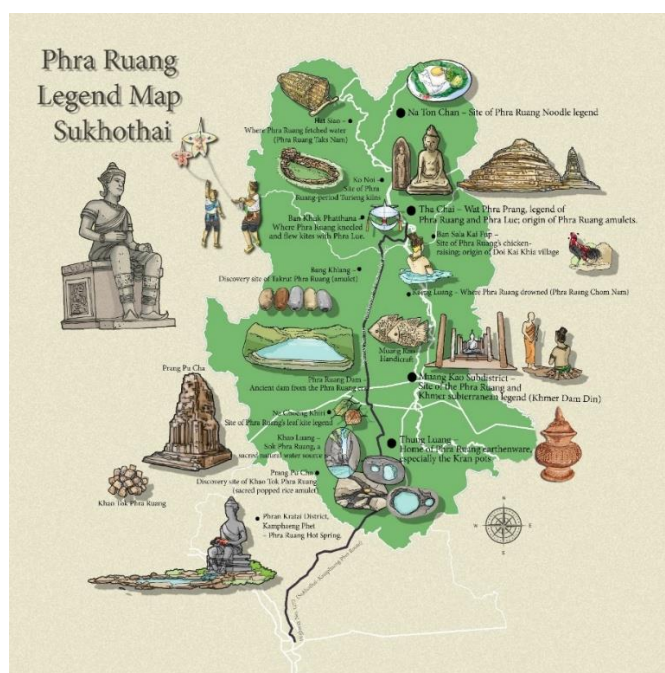


Figure 1 A map showing the Phra Ruang Road, which connects areas from Si Satchanalai National Park, Sukhothai, and Kamphaeng Phet. This route is interwoven with cultural beliefs and legends about Phra Ruang, and it encompasses all four communities studied in this research.

Source: Researcher team

Situated along the Phra Ruang corridor, the four communities selected for this study collectively illustrate the diverse dynamics of cultural capital:

- **Ta Chai Community:** This community features a dense overlap of cultural and historical capital. It is home to legends of the Phra Ruang and Phra Lue kites, as well as traditional Sukhothai gold and silver handicrafts. Wat Phra Prang serves as the epicenter for local traditions, with the community actively using the temple grounds and ritual spaces for dramatic performances and cultural storytelling, demonstrating an ability to bring the past to life.

- Mueang Kao (Old City) Community: Located around the Sukhothai Historical Park, this community maintains an intimate relationship with symbolic spaces like ancient temples, archaeological sites, and the main stage for the Loy Krathong festival. It hosts local artisan groups, including casters of Buddhist art and producers of the province's iconic Sangkhalok ceramics. Furthermore, a network of storytellers acts as cultural interpreters, communicating the past through contemporary activities.

- Ban Na Ton Chan Community: This area exhibits prominent strength in human and social capital, cultivated through the development of homestays and a

mud-fermented textile weaving cooperative. Groups of elders, housewives, and local sages are instrumental in transmitting wisdom through activities such as Bai Sri (traditional offering) making, retro-style Ramwong folk dances, and tourism initiatives linked to local legends of Phra Ruang.

- Thung Luang Community: This is a craft-centric area with cultural capital derived from its pottery traditions, notably the Mor Kran Phra Ruang earthenware, and community rituals like the Kwan Din (spirit of the earth) festival and ceremonies honoring Mother Earth (Phra Mae Thoranee). The community also possesses built capital in the form of traditional houses and ceremonial grounds that are still actively used.

An overview of the fieldwork indicates that in Sukhothai, ICH operates as a living cultural system embedded in everyday life and landscape, rather than as a set of isolated archaeological sites. This helps to explain why community capital in Sukhothai is frequently mobilized as a foundation for learning and local development, most visibly through community-based tourism and the adaptation of traditional craftsmanship into contemporary practices across multiple local contexts. Understanding heritage as living heritage is therefore a necessary starting point for examining community capital, and it provides the basis for the subsequent analysis of how these capitals are characterized and expressed in place.

Result

ICH inventory and community capital profiles across the four study sites

This fieldwork was conducted across the four communities along the Phra Ruang Road, employing a survey on community capital perception, a community capital analysis, and a community strength assessment. These tools were used to measure both the awareness and the operational readiness of capitals in each dimension. Survey results confirm that a high percentage of residents in all communities (over 80%) are aware of their community's capital strengths and utilize them as a basis for various activities. However, the capacity to sustain and leverage these capitals varies, corresponding to the density of human and social

capital, though performance levels across all sites remained high at 70–80%.

Specific dynamics were observed: Mueang Kao exhibits high levels of interaction with external actors through its festivals and robust networks of storytellers and artisans. Ban Na Ton Chan demonstrates strength in household-level experiential learning. Ban Ta Chai leverages rituals as a mechanism for social cohesion and cultural interpretation. Ban Thung Luang possesses a strong craft and physical capital base but faces a more tenuous chain of knowledge succession.

Across all four communities, the analysis identified a crucial shared foundation: cultural and human capital are deeply anchored to built capital, namely temples, historical sites, and community learning spaces. To facilitate a clear comparison, the capital levels and ICH assets of the four sites are summarized below, highlighting their prominent capitals, assets in active use, and unique characteristics. This comparison reveals similarities and differences with profound implications for ICH transmission and utilization (see Table 1).

The analysis indicates that cultural capital, in conjunction with built capital, functions as the foundational platform that enables the practical enactment of ICH. Meanwhile, human and social capital are the decisive factors determining the frequency and quality of its transmission. Mueang Kao's advantage in external connectivity makes it suitable for developing interpretive trails with quality-controlled content. Ban Na Ton Chan's strong household-level human and social capital suggests potential for upgrading skills curricula and establishing artisan clinics. Ban Ta Chai could further leverage its ritual calendar and Phra Ruang-based storytelling to foster iterative learning. Ban Thung Luang, however, must urgently address knowledge succession and elevate product standards without compromising cultural meaning.

At the same time, data on community concerns revealed significant economic pressures. In all four communities, this was the primary concern, cited by over 50% of respondents. This underscores the necessity for development models that respect local meanings while integrating safeguarding measures through the operational mechanisms discussed in the following section.

Table 1 Comparative profile of ICH and community capitals across the four study sites.

Community	CCF strengths and key ICH assets in use	Distinctives
Ban Ta Chai	Human, Social, Built; Phra Ruang narratives and sacred places; temples and ceremonial grounds as active interpretive venues; Sukhothai gold and silver craft	Ritual venues function as the primary social integrator and cultural interface
Sukhothai Old Town	Human, Cultural, Built; historic monuments; Loi Krathong and Candle Procession; networks of artisans and storytellers	Strong external linkage and steady visitor flow
Ban Na Ton Chan	Human, Cultural, Built; homestays, mud-fermented cloth, knowledge houses, hands-on transmission within households and groups	Learning-by-doing is the core mode of transmission and a household income base
Ban Thung Luang	Human, Cultural, Built; Phra Ruang earthenware, old houses, ceremonial grounds, soil-blessing, and earth-goddess rites	Strong craft and physical base with a thinner succession pipeline

Mechanisms of community capitals in ICH transmission and translation

Analysis of the community capital mechanisms within the CCF framework, from the initial formation of learning to its translation into economic and spatial outcomes, reveals a set of enabling conditions involving key actors, methods, platforms, and timing. The process confirms that cultural and built capital set the foundational stage for ICH, with human and social capital accelerating it further. Human and social capital further accelerate the process. Financial and political capital are mobilized to support and amplify these efforts only after tangible results begin to emerge. This process is not linear but cyclical, repeatedly affirmed through annual events, routines, and on-the-ground practices.

The findings show that the capital transmission process in all four communities relies on real-world platforms as classrooms, temples, ritual grounds, historical sites, wisdom centers, kilns, and traditional houses. These elements function as the essential infrastructure for cultural learning and transmission, enabling situated practice through seasonal community work. The nucleus of human capital resides in wisdom keepers, women's groups, master artisans, and storytellers. The arteries of social capital are the local art troupes, youth clubs, volunteer networks, and craft cooperatives. When the seasonal calendar and physical spaces align, iterative learning occurs. Based on the preceding analysis, ICH can be organized on the basis of the CCF (Table 1), arranged within a

Transmission/ Translation approach, and synthesized into a cross-case matrix that summarizes community capital transmission pathways (Table 2).

As shown in Table 2, the approach of Ban Ta Chai is anchored to rituals and key events, fostering intergenerational learning within a shared narrative framework. Mueang Kao utilizes a station-based learning system, allowing youth to engage in real-world scenarios with visitors. Ban Na Ton Chan embeds knowledge transmission within daily household life, seamlessly integrating skills and income generation. Ban Thung Luang follows a skills training pathway tied to physical materials and tools, reinforcing a holistic understanding of the pottery production process.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the translation of community capital in all four sites is guided by a principle of aligning space and time with the meaning of the heritage. A clear separation is maintained between sacred ritual stages and cultural performances designed for visitors. Quality and safety standards are also established for craftwork and learning activities. Crucially, the emphasis is not on maximizing participation numbers but on ensuring each cycle provides comprehensive learning and generates tangible income that returns to households and groups (see Table 3).

As detailed in Table 3, Ban Ta Chai uses narrative as a central axis, allowing it to create thematically coherent performances and products. Mueang Kao demonstrates that learning stations aligned with the archaeological landscape can enable concise

interpretation that does not overwhelm the site. Ban Na Ton Chan leverages local wisdom to perform three functions simultaneously, production, sales, and teaching, which reduces management costs and maintains quality more effectively than a segmented

approach. Ban Thung Luang has developed a learning pathway that traces the entire production process, from raw material to the kiln, instilling an appreciation for the craft's intrinsic value and motivating the next generation of successors.

Table 2 Pathways of ICH transmission: actors, methods, venues, temporal cadence, and outcomes

Community	Actors, methods & venues	Frequency	Observed outcomes
Ban Ta Chai	Master bearers and ritual leaders; mythic storytelling and intergenerational mentoring at temple pavilions and ceremonial grounds	Seasonal, festival-aligned community calendar	Ready-to-perform skill sets; regular apprentice intake
Sukhothai Old Town	Dance music teachers, storytellers, and volunteer interpreters practice classes in schools and point-to-point interpretive stops in the historical park	Weekly and monthly guided runs	Youth interpreter teams, peer learning, and confident visitor engagement
Ban Na Ton Chan	Elders, craft masters, women's groups; hands-on mentoring and workshops at "knowledge houses" and households	Year-round; ~4–6 sessions per month	Steady new learners; skills integrated with household production
Ban Thung Luang	Master potters and mid-career craft group; on-site demos at clay pits and kilns with stepwise training and mnemonic songs	Monthly plus pre-ritual intensives	Core pottery skills maintained; thin successor chain without stable mentoring

Table 3 Mechanisms of ICH translation: ICH activities, spatial arrangements, and safeguards

Community	ICH Activities	Spatial arrangement	Safeguards and Guidelines
Ban Ta Chai	Seasonal Phra Ruang storytelling programs, ritual performances, and craft-linked items	Separate sacred rites from visitor demos; temple and ceremonial grounds as core venues	Joint ritual calendar, shared script, capped audience size, and set performance durations
Sukhothai Old Town	Short interpretive routes; guided tours paired with artisans	Historical-park "learning stations"; controlled time and group size	Co-authored scripts with community bearers; clear sacred vs. demo zones; content review cycles
Ban Na Ton Chan	Learning homestays, mud-fermented cloth clinics, and short craft courses	"Knowledge houses" as studio–shop–classroom	Standardized process steps, learner kits, appropriate class size, and product assessed before sale
Ban Thung Luang	Kiln demonstrations, pottery learning center, contemporary product line	Process stations: clay prep → forming → firing; links with schools/youth clubs	Safety and kiln-quality manual, reference exemplars, annual successor plan, and mentorship slots

The analysis of these mechanisms indicates that sustainable development is most viable when initial investment prioritizes 'people, places, and program management systems' before pursuing large-scale, community-facing commercial expansion. A consistent calendar of activities is the core mechanism for natural

skill filtration and enhancement. Meanwhile, maintaining meaning and quality requires co-developed scripts with knowledge holders, defined frameworks for the use of ritual versus cultural activities, and standardized production protocols for crafts. Thus, fieldwork reveals a recurring sequence of capital

activation: a foundation of knowledge and practical platforms, followed by the activation of people and networks, which in turn attracts resource- support mechanisms once tangible outcomes are achieved.

Cross-case patterns and comparative synthesis

A cross- case comparison of the four communities reveals that wisdom keepers, artisan groups, youth networks, and storytellers are central to enabling iterative learning cycles anchored to calendars and work

schedules. The perception of ICH as a tangible asset is a critical precursor to mobilizing financial and policy capital for scaling up activities. Simultaneously, the continuity of knowledge transmission directly correlates with the consistency of cultural programming. While all communities exhibit similar patterns of capital utilization, structural differences between the sites result in varying capacities for ICH transmission and translation (see Table 4).

Table 4 Cross-case synthesis of capitals, cadence, and safeguarding.

Synthetic indicator	Ban Ta Chai	Sukhothai Old Town	Ban Na Ton Chan	Ban Thung Luang
Driving base capitals	Cultural + Built	Cultural + Built	Cultural + Human	Built + Cultural
Catalysts (Human + Social)	Ritual leaders, community masters	Dance music teachers, storytellers, volunteer network	Elders, craft masters, women's groups	Mid-generation clay masters, craft group
Activity cadence	Seasonal and festival-based	Weekly-monthly, continuous	Weekly, 4–6 times per month	Monthly and pre-ritual peaks
Succession chain	Moderate to strong, leader-dependent	Strong, driven by frequent rounds	Very strong household mentoring	Thin, needs more rounds and mentors
Trailing capitals mobilized	Event-driven finance	Finance + place-based support	Steady household income	Funds/support for the learning center

Mueang Kao possesses high external connectivity, leveraging its status as a well-known tourist destination to create frequent activity cycles for a steady flow of visitors. In contrast, Ban Na Ton Chan relies on household- level learning, enabling activities that generate direct household income. Ban Ta Chai is driven by seasonal ritual events, which provide systematic training in event management. Ban Thung Luang excels in its craft- based and physical capital, focusing on educational activities for outsiders. These variations are not linear advantages or disadvantages; rather, they are enabling conditions that determine which utilization pathways are most suitable for each community and what risks must be managed.

When indicators from all sites are synthesized, three critical relationships concerning community capitals emerge. First, communities with higher activity frequency and intergenerational collaboration are more effective at cultivating new learners and sustaining operational teams than those with only sporadic events. Second, the deliberate separation of cultural presentation spaces from sacred ritual grounds enables more effective safeguarding of cultural value. When

systematically applied, this allows for an increase in activity cycles without necessarily compromising that value. Third, a recurring pattern across all sites is that financial and policy capital are mobilized only after community capitals are stable and have demonstrated tangible results.

These three observations confirm the recurring sequence of capital activation identified in the fieldwork: Cultural and built capital serve as the foundational base; human and social capital are the activators that make the system dynamic; and financial and political capital follow once concrete outcomes are achieved. These patterns will be taken forward into the discussion, where they are analyzed through the lens of the CCF and ICH framework to synthesize a concrete operational tool for the community network.

Discussion

The overall findings of this study indicate that built capital functions as the infrastructural base of ICH. Human and social capital sustain intergenerational transmission and enhance the quality of knowledge. This suggests that safeguarding ICH at the community

level does not result from inscription or external valorization alone; it is maintained through configurations of capital that communities control and mobilize in everyday practice. The result accords with international debates on ICH safeguarding, which caution that top-down, budget-led programming often museumizes ICH and detaches it from lived use. Sustainable community development cannot be achieved effectively if place-embedded capitals, including cultural, human, and social capital, are neglected. In contrast, management approaches grounded in community capitals enable context-appropriate adaptation and transmission under community-defined conditions, which are core requirements for cultural sustainability. The community-capitals perspective is not merely a classificatory scheme of resources; it is an analytic and practical lens that enables communities to see themselves, including their capacities, strengths, and constraints, beginning with human capital. Nevertheless, in a period of rapid social change, an understanding of place-specific capitals alone is unlikely to be sufficient.

Interpreting CCF and ICH for sustainability

The cross-case analysis reveals a consistent pattern of capital activation: (1) Cultural and Built Capital serve as the operational base for ICH in all sites; (2) Human and Social Capital act as catalysts, ensuring the continuity and quality of knowledge transmission; and (3) tangible outcomes, in learning, livelihoods, and the visibility of ICH assets, subsequently attract Financial and Political Capital. This relationship is not linear but cyclical and sequential, which explains why top-down budgetary injections often fail to guarantee sustainability without prior investment in people, places, and consistent learning systems.

Within this sequence, sustainability manifests in two key dimensions. The first is the platform for practice, the built capital of temples, ritual grounds, historical sites, and wisdom centers, which functions as a social infrastructure where knowledge becomes deeply embedded through hands-on practice and shared meaning-making. The second is the intergenerational team of practice, the consistent collaboration among wisdom keepers, mid-career artisans, women's groups, and youth networks, which facilitates a natural process

of skill filtration and succession. When these two dimensions operate in synergy, financial and policy support can be integrated without eroding cultural value.

Situating this analysis within specific contexts reveals significant cross-site variations. In areas with high external social capital, like Ban Ta Chai and Mueang Kao, the Phra Ruang Road cultural corridor can be leveraged to align activities with ritual calendars and the heritage landscape. In contrast, Ban Na Ton Chan, with its dense household-level human and social capital, is well-suited for economic capital development through income-generating household enterprises. Ban Thung Luang, with its strong craft and physical capital base, is ideally positioned as a center for craft education and skills transmission that can further elevate its community products. These observations are grounded in an understanding of ICH not as a fixed entity but as a living system that is continuously reproduced and re-signified in response to socio-economic contexts (Smith & Akagawa, 2008). A prime example is the creative re-signification of Sukhothai metalwork in the contemporary designs of Theerakit Menrakul (Supakorn, 2025), which reflects a capital reconfiguration that allows ICH to function in the creative economy while remaining anchored to its intellectual roots.

Therefore, from a management perspective within the ICH and CCF frameworks, strengthening local agency and community participation is the key to sustainable ICH utilization, as it builds self-reliance before the arrival of state funding. This is supported by studies emphasizing community-based development and cultural capital in various contexts (Gould, 2018; Amloy, 2023, 2025; Arkarapoti Wong & Chindapol, 2023; Chumduang, 2021). Furthermore, the strength of kinship and social networks, which underpin the success of the homestays in Ban Na Ton Chan, remains a critical factor enabling continuous participation and succession, consistent with the findings of Chumduang & Thirathamrongwee (2025). However, tensions between conservation and utilization persist, particularly in World Heritage contexts like Ban Ta Chai and Mueang Kao. The growth of commercial tourism and the imposition of external narratives can alter the structure of ICH and subtly shift cultural meanings. This points to the need for multi-level governance mechanisms that provide a framework for sustainable development by

integrating economic, cultural, and environmental values (Landorf, 2009; Yutong & Rahman, 2024).

Managing transition and translation of ICH through existing capital and cross-community learning

Conceptually, for the sustainable application of ICH, this study proposes a view of interlinked capitals, where transmission and translation are understood as intertwined processes. For instance, the transmission of skills (human capital) occurs through community activities (social capital) on sacred or historical sites (built capital), all of which work in concert to sustain cultural capital within a changing context. This perspective supports calls to center the community's interpretive authority in governance (Waterton & Smith, 2010; Loulanski, 2006). Conversely, managing capital with a singular focus on short-term or quantitative outcomes risks the erosion of authenticity and context for ICH (Barnes, 2022). The sustainability of cultural capital, therefore, depends on its integration into the everyday lives of community members, where knowledge is sustained through shared practice and continuous, collective interpretation.

The translation of ICH into economic activities, cultural tourism, or contemporary place-making should not begin by imposing external models. Instead, as argued by Banks et al. (2013), it must be grounded in a community's existing capital and managed according to its terms. This approach to managing translation involves community-designed mechanisms, such as demarcating sacred rituals from public performances and controlling group sizes and activity cycles to match the team's capacity. It also fosters a successional pathway for youth, moving from participant to assistant, practitioner, and eventually, teacher. Collaboration with external bodies, therefore, must be on the community's terms, preserving their right to interpretive authority.

Promoting development based on a community's capital base strengthens its distinct identity. This, in turn, creates opportunities for cross-community learning characterized by observation, selective adoption, and adaptation, a method more effective than the formulaic replication of a state-endorsed 'role model' (Westoby & Dowling, 2013). A community with strong human capital but lacking a clear spatial organization for activities might adapt the zoning and scripting

techniques from a site that excels in traditional event management. Conversely, a community with a robust craft and physical capital base but weak successional pathways could borrow mentorship systems from a community with strong human and social capital. This process encourages each community to reinterpret its capital, recognize its unique potential, and develop from an internal foundation rather than relying on top-down initiatives.

Community capital mapping as a tool for cross-learning and networking

Viewed through the CCF, the Sukhothai case illustrates a general mechanism of community-based heritage governance that can be applied in other heritage contexts. In settings where localities identify community capitals across comparable dimensions, including cultural, human, social, built, and financial, and make these capitals jointly visible through participatory processes, communities can set agendas for safeguarding, transmission, and value creation without relying solely on external directives. The policy implication drawn from Sukhothai is that ICH remains living when community capital structures are formally recognized and used as the basis for decision-making.

This research, therefore, puts forward a practical approach to cross-community learning, one centered on comparison and reflection. The aim is to create a learning tool for communities to navigate cultural continuity, the interrelationships between capitals, and the challenges of contemporary heritage management. Development becomes meaningful when communities can define their direction based on capitals they understand and value themselves. To translate this research into practice, a Community Capital Map was synthesized to illustrate the key capital nodes and the pathways of transmission and translation in each context. This map functions as both a reflective mirror for individual communities and a practical guide for mutual, cross-community learning, intended for practitioners and local agencies.

The creation of this community capital map was a collaborative process between the research team and local leaders from all four communities, conducted through workshops, joint analysis, and dialogue. This process reframes ICH from a static asset into a shared learning space. A key benefit of this mapping is that it

enables each community to articulate its capital value more clearly by seeing it in comparison to others (Pain & Francis, 2003). It fosters a community-led network that reduces dependency on external authorities by mobilizing capitals defined and validated by the communities themselves. In this comparative process, the map serves as both a reflective mirror and a comparative platform, creating a space for critical questioning, experiential exchange, and cross-site learning (Percy-Smith & Burns, 2012).

This approach aligns with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), which emphasizes

the mobilization of existing assets and promotes equity among knowledge holders, practitioners, and learners within the community (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). It also resonates with the principles of counter-mapping, which seeks to create space for community voices to be heard as legitimate managers of their cultural heritage (Schofield, 2014).

This research thus presents the community capital maps of Ban Ta Chai, Mueang Kao, Ban Na Ton Chan, and Ban Thung Luang (Figure 2), using a shared analytical framework to highlight their dominant capitals, linkages, and potential for cross-site learning:



Figure 2 A capital map for learning sustainable community in Sukhothai.

Source: Researcher team

When placed in comparison, the maps reveal that Ban Ta Chai's distinction lies in its cultural capital, particularly the Phra Ruang legend and ancient crafts; its strength is interpreting the past to reinforce a collective identity, though it shows less flexibility in adapting its human and natural capital. Mueang Kao possesses high symbolic capital by integrating rituals with historical sites but has a gap in the horizontal social capital that would empower broader community roles. Ban Na Ton Chan excels in human and social capital, especially through the roles of women's groups and local leaders, positioning it as a potential model for participatory capital management. Ban Thung Luang demonstrates a strong link between its physical and cultural capital and the local economy (e.g., pottery, traditional houses) but requires stronger mechanisms for intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Through this comparison, communities can see their capital in the mirror of others, a process of reflective learning. This can trigger new perspectives: a community that once viewed its textiles merely as products may come to recognize them as symbols of identity and intergenerational wisdom. A community that saw its legends as mere stories may realize they constitute a framework for interpreting their unique landscape and history. Moreover, this map can be used as a strategic tool for development planning that is grounded in internal potential rather than imported models, helping communities to analyze their strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in capital management in a targeted and sustainable manner.

In the same vein, the community capital map developed with local leaders and practitioners can be understood as a governance tool rather than merely a product of data synthesis. The mapping renders dispersed capitals in the community as a coherent system, makes visible the linkages between cultural assets and livelihoods, and provides a basis for negotiation with state agencies and tourism developers. As such, it responds to international debates that seek practical means to translate community voices into formal heritage management agendas.

Ultimately, the community capital map is not merely a tool for inventorying what each community has. It is a tool for asking more critical questions: 'Which of our capitals are we underutilizing?' and 'How

do the capitals of others help us to see ours more clearly?' This forms the very foundation of a development process driven by a community's capitals, relationships, and meanings.

Conclusion

This research argues that the management of ICH should be viewed through the lens of existing, place-based community capitals. Its core finding is a sequential and relational system of capitals, where cultural and built capital provide the operational base for ICH; human and social capital catalyze the quality and continuity of its transmission; and the tangible outcomes of this process attract subsequent financial and policy capital. Developed collaboratively with community leaders, the resulting Community Capital Map serves to visualize these capitals as a systemic resource. This tool for reflection and comparison acts as a catalyst for communities to set their agendas regarding capital prioritization, adaptation, and the future of their heritage. This allows community capitals and ICH to coexist and reinforce one another in a dynamic cycle, which forms the very foundation of sustainable community development.

Theoretical implications

This study validates the significance of community capital-based heritage governance, supporting a body of research that asserts sustainable heritage management must commence with an understanding of the situated, embedded capitals formed through a community's relationships, lifeways, and meaning-making (Danda, 2024; Iaione et al., 2022). Creating a shared learning space for communities to define and manage their capital is a process of reclaiming identity and empowering them to determine the role of heritage on their terms (Ratanakosol et al., 2017).

In World Heritage contexts, this implies a necessary shift from management models focused on static physical conservation toward flexible, adaptive systems that are open to multi-stakeholder participation and integrated with sustainable development goals across economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Larsen & Logan, 2018; Orbaşlı & Cesaro, 2020). From this perspective, the economic valorization of cultural

capital should concentrate on generating new value while preserving its original importance, a notion that can underpin a community-oriented creative economy (Cerisola, 2019).

Ultimately, the sustainability of ICH management depends on an integrated foundation of capitals, not a singular one. It requires building the capacity of communities to adapt, communicate their values, and participate in shaping policy direction. In short, sustainable heritage management is a social process that must be internally driven, not merely externally imposed (Mui & Leng, 2023; Somwethee et al., 2024).

Practical recommendations

Practically, this research recommends that any policy planning for sustainability should begin with participatory community capital assessment. The development of Community Capital Maps must be an iterative process involving fieldwork and reflective learning to ensure communities fully recognize their assets and interlinkages. This fosters community agency, enabling them to take ownership of heritage management through internal mechanisms such as wisdom keepers, youth groups, and artisan collectives (Srichai et al., 2024). Mobilizing social, cultural, and human capital to achieve economic self-reliance can sustain both livelihoods and community resilience (Tavarom & Luengalongkot, 2025). Furthermore, cross-sectoral collaboration among local government, schools, academic institutions, and the private sector should be promoted to integrate these capitals into local development plans. This mechanism helps embed ICH within the community development process, where communities interpret their heritage and drive sustainable tourism.

Finally, this study argues that a comparative understanding of community capitals is a foundational basis for context-appropriate heritage management. The shift from symbolic preservation to participatory heritage governance is feasible when decision-making rests on community-held capitals. Although grounded in a specific locality, the mechanism that maps the relational structure among community capitals offers both an interpretive and an operational frame for other heritage sites facing pressures from tourism, top-down administration, or demographic change. It enables communities to initiate purposeful management systems

of their own and to develop policy mechanisms, in theory and in practice, that support the sustainable governance of ICH.

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Ethics statement

This study (CMUREC 66/102) was conducted in full compliance with the ethical standards for human research.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

The authors acknowledge the use of QuillBot (an AI-assisted tool) to improve language clarity and readability and enhance linguistic accuracy. The manuscript has been fully reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.

CRedit author statement

Punjaphut Thirathamrongwee: Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing- Original draft, Writing- Reviewing and Editing. **Watcharaphong Chumduang:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Validation. **Nuchjarin Sriwiset:** Data Curation, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Visualization.

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