Cultural Capital and Soft Power Tourism Management: The Case of Thailand

Chayapoj Lee-Anant

Kulvadee Lamaijeen

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Dedicated to

Our parents with our deepest gratitude and love, whose unwavering support, sacrifices, encouragement, and belief in the value of education have shaped our lives and academic journeys.

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Preface

The twenty-first century has witnessed profound transformations in tourism systems worldwide. Technological innovation, globalization, demographic change, sustainability concerns, and shifting consumer preferences have fundamentally altered the ways destinations compete and create value. At the same time, culture has emerged as one of the most important strategic assets available to destinations seeking to differentiate themselves within an increasingly competitive global tourism marketplace. As travelers increasingly pursue authentic, meaningful, and transformative experiences, cultural resources have become central to tourism development, destination branding, and international competitiveness.

Concurrently, governments and policymakers have begun to recognize the growing importance of soft power as a mechanism for enhancing international influence, strengthening national image, and supporting economic development. Tourism occupies a unique position within this context because it serves as one of the most direct channels through which cultural resources are communicated, experienced, and interpreted by global audiences. Through tourism, destinations are able to transform cultural heritage, traditions, gastronomy, wellness practices, festivals, creative industries, and local lifestyles into experiences that generate economic, social, cultural, and symbolic value.

Despite the increasing recognition of culture and soft power within tourism development, much of the existing literature continues to examine these concepts separately. Studies

of cultural tourism often focus on heritage management, visitor behavior, and cultural preservation, while soft power research tends to emphasize international relations, public diplomacy, and nation branding. Relatively limited attention has been given to understanding how cultural capital and soft power interact within tourism systems and how destinations can strategically leverage these resources to enhance competitiveness, sustainability, and long-term development. This gap is particularly evident in the context of emerging tourism destinations and culturally rich societies such as Thailand.

The primary purpose of this book is therefore to develop an integrated understanding of the relationship between cultural capital, soft power, and tourism management. Specifically, the book seeks to examine how cultural resources can be transformed into tourism value, how tourism contributes to soft power development, and how these processes can support sustainable destination development. Rather than viewing culture solely as a tourism attraction or soft power merely as a political concept, the book positions both as interconnected strategic resources that influence destination competitiveness, visitor experiences, community development, and national reputation.

A second objective is to provide a comprehensive examination of Thailand as a leading case study of cultural capital and soft power tourism. Thailand represents a particularly relevant context because of its rich cultural heritage, globally recognized gastronomy, wellness traditions, religious practices, festivals, creative industries, and hospitality culture. These cultural assets have played a significant role in shaping

Thailand's tourism success and international image. By examining Thailand's experiences, the book aims to generate insights that may be applicable to other destinations seeking to leverage culture as a driver of tourism development and international influence.

The book also seeks to bridge theory and practice. While grounded in established theoretical perspectives such as cultural capital theory, cultural economics, destination management, and soft power theory, the discussion extends beyond conceptual analysis to address practical implications for policymakers, tourism organizations, destination managers, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and researchers. Particular attention is given to contemporary challenges including sustainability, overtourism, cultural commodification, digital transformation, climate change, and changing tourist expectations. In doing so, the book contributes to both academic scholarship and professional practice.

Furthermore, this book adopts a multidisciplinary perspective. Tourism is inherently interconnected with culture, economics, sociology, geography, anthropology, management, public policy, and international relations. Understanding the role of cultural capital and soft power within tourism therefore requires drawing upon insights from multiple disciplines. This interdisciplinary approach reflects the complex nature of contemporary tourism systems and enables a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing destinations in the twenty-first century.

To achieve these objectives, the book is organized into ten chapters that progressively build an integrated understanding of cultural capital and soft power tourism management.

Chapter 1 introduces the key concepts of tourism, culture, cultural capital, and soft power while providing an overview of Thailand's position within the global tourism system. The chapter establishes the rationale for examining tourism through the combined lenses of cultural capital and soft power.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical foundations of cultural capital and soft power. The chapter reviews major theoretical perspectives, including Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, cultural economics, soft power theory, nation branding, and cultural diplomacy. An integrated conceptual framework for cultural capital tourism management is proposed.

Chapter 3 examines Thailand's cultural capital by exploring its historical foundations, cultural identity, tangible heritage, intangible heritage, creative industries, and regional cultural diversity. The chapter demonstrates how cultural resources contribute to destination attractiveness and national identity.

Chapter 4 focuses on soft power tourism in Thailand. It analyzes the evolution of Thailand's soft power strategy, tourism policies, destination image, cultural diplomacy initiatives, and international competitiveness. Particular attention is given to the role of tourism in strengthening Thailand's global influence.

Chapter 5 explores heritage, festivals, and cultural tourism. The chapter examines heritage tourism, UNESCO heritage resources, temple tourism, cultural festivals, religious tourism, and heritage management practices. It highlights the importance of preserving cultural authenticity while enhancing visitor experiences.

Chapter 6 investigates gastronomy, wellness, and sports tourism as forms of tourism soft power. Discussions include Thai cuisine, food diplomacy, wellness tourism, traditional Thai medicine, Thai massage, forest bathing, and Muay Thai tourism. The chapter demonstrates how cultural practices can generate both economic value and international influence.

Chapter 7 examines creative tourism and community-based tourism. The chapter explores cultural entrepreneurship, creative industries, local participation, community cultural capital, and sustainable community development. It emphasizes the importance of local communities as custodians and beneficiaries of cultural resources.

Chapter 8 focuses on the strategic management of cultural capital tourism. Topics include destination governance, stakeholder management, cultural resource planning, experience design, storytelling, destination branding, and tourism marketing. The chapter provides practical frameworks for managing cultural tourism resources effectively.

Chapter 9 addresses sustainability, technology, and future challenges. The discussion includes cultural sustainability, overtourism, climate change, smart tourism, artificial

intelligence, and digital cultural experiences. The chapter highlights emerging issues that will shape the future of tourism development.

Finally, *Chapter 10* examines future directions for cultural capital and soft power tourism. It discusses global tourism megatrends, regenerative tourism, cultural innovation, future tourist behavior, and Thailand's tourism vision. The chapter concludes by proposing the Thai Soft Power Tourism Model (TSPTM), an integrated framework that explains how cultural capital can be transformed into soft power and tourism outcomes.

Throughout the book, tourism is conceptualized not merely as an economic activity but as a mechanism for cultural exchange, value creation, identity formation, and international engagement. By adopting this perspective, the book seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how destinations can leverage cultural resources responsibly and strategically to achieve sustainable tourism development and long-term competitiveness.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this book would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, and contributions of many individuals and organizations. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who have played a role in the development of this work.

First and foremost, we would like to thank our colleagues at the Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University as well as Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University for providing an intellectually stimulating environment that encourages research, innovation, and academic collaboration. Their support and encouragement have contributed significantly to the development of many of the ideas presented throughout this book.

We are particularly grateful to our students, alumni, and research participants whose experiences, insights, and perspectives have enriched our understanding of tourism, culture, and destination development. Through classroom discussions, fieldwork, research projects, and professional engagement, they have continually inspired us to explore new questions and perspectives regarding the role of culture in tourism.

We also extend our appreciation to tourism practitioners, community leaders, cultural entrepreneurs, heritage managers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders throughout Thailand who have generously shared their knowledge and experiences over the years. Their dedication to preserving cultural heritage,

supporting local communities, and advancing sustainable tourism development has provided valuable practical insights that have informed many aspects of this book.

We would also like to express our gratitude to our families, friends, and loved ones for their patience, understanding, and unwavering support throughout the writing process. Academic writing is often a long and demanding journey, and their encouragement has been a constant source of motivation and strength.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the cultural communities of Thailand. The country's diverse heritage, traditions, knowledge systems, culinary practices, festivals, artistic expressions, and local identities serve as the inspiration for this book. We hope that this work contributes, in some small way, to a greater appreciation of Thailand's cultural richness and to ongoing efforts to preserve, celebrate, and sustainably utilize these invaluable resources for future generations.

Chayapoj Lee-Anant

Kulvadee Lamaijeen

Bangkok, Thailand

2026

“*Soft power* is *culture* with a passport.”

Chayapoj Lee-Anant &

Kulvadee Lamaijeen

About the Authors

Assoc. Prof. Chayapoj Lee-Anant, Ph.D.



Associate Professor Dr. Chayapoj (Alex) Lee-Anant is a tourism and hospitality academic, researcher, and former industry professional at the Department of Tourism and Hospitality Industry, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Thailand. He currently serves as Director of the Lifelong Learning Institute (LLL-Humanities) and Director of the Kasetsart Integrated Tourism Management (KITMAN). He also contributes to national tourism development as an Honorary Advisor to the Senate Committee on Tourism and Sports of the Parliament of Thailand.

Dr. Lee-Anant holds a Ph.D. and a master's degree in Integrated Tourism and Hospitality Management from the National Institute of Development Administration, an M.A. in International Aviation Management from the International University of Applied Sciences in Germany, and a bachelor's degree with first-class honours in Ecotourism and Hospitality Management from Srinakharinwirot University.

His academic and research interests encompass tourism and hospitality management, cultural capital, soft power tourism, destination development, cultural and creative tourism, community-based tourism, wellness tourism, tourist behaviour, service quality, aviation management, and sustainable tourism policy. He has led and participated in numerous institutionally and externally funded research projects addressing tourism development, destination image, cultural exports, creative tourism, hospitality services, and human-capital development.

Before entering academia, he accumulated extensive professional experience in international hotel management, sales, guest services, and meetings and events. He held managerial positions with leading global hospitality companies, including Hilton Worldwide, Marriott International, and ONYX Hospitality Group. His industry background continues to inform his teaching and research, particularly in relation to service innovation, visitor experience, destination competitiveness, and the development of professionally competent human capital for the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Asst. Prof. Kulvadee Lamaijeen, Ph.D.



Assistant Professor Dr. Kulvadee (Kul) Lamaijeen is a tourism academic, researcher, and university administrator with extensive expertise in community-based tourism, cultural tourism, creative tourism, and sustainable destination development. She currently serves as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University, Thailand. Previously, she was Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Educational Quality Assurance and Chair of the Tourism and Hospitality Management Programme. She has also served as a lecturer and programme committee member in tourism and hospitality management since 2007.

Dr. Lamaijeen holds a Ph.D. in Integrated Tourism Management from the National Institute of Development Administration, MBA in Tourism Management from Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Tourism Industry from Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University. Her doctoral research developed a model for community-based tourism management in designated areas for sustainable tourism, reflecting her longstanding commitment to participatory

planning, local empowerment, and the sustainable use of community resources.

Her research focuses particularly on community-based tourism, cultural and creative tourism, local museums, agritourism, wellness tourism, tourism routes, and tourism development in Thailand. She has led numerous research projects involving local communities in Thailand, including studies on cultural-capital-based creative tourism, community museums, homestay development, local handicrafts, agricultural tourism, religious tourism, and community learning resources. Her work emphasizes the participation of local stakeholders and the transformation of cultural identity, traditional knowledge, local lifestyles, and community heritage into meaningful and sustainable tourism experiences.

In addition to her academic leadership, Dr. Lamaijeen serves as the Editor-in-Chief of the Humanities and Social Sciences Journal, Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University, a peer-reviewed academic journal that disseminates scholarly research and academic contributions in the fields of humanities and social sciences.

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"Cultural capital becomes *soft power* when a nation's heritage is preserved, transformed into meaningful experiences, and shared with the world."

Chayapoj Lee-Anant &

Kulvadee Lamaijeen

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Chapter 1
Introduction to Cultural Capital, Soft Power, and Tourism

1.1 Tourism in the Twenty-First Century

Tourism has emerged as one of the most influential socio-economic phenomena of the twenty-first century, shaping economic development, cultural exchange, technological innovation, and international mobility on an unprecedented scale. Beyond its traditional role as a leisure activity, tourism has evolved into a complex global system that influences employment, trade, investment, diplomacy, environmental sustainability, and community well-being. Consequently, tourism is no longer viewed merely as an economic sector but as a multidimensional force that contributes to national development and global interconnectedness.

The early decades of the twenty-first century witnessed remarkable growth in international tourism, although this expansion was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. International tourism subsequently recovered strongly, with approximately 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals recorded worldwide in 2024. This represented 99% of the level recorded in 2019, indicating a near-complete recovery to pre-pandemic levels (UN Tourism, 2025). This recovery demonstrates the remarkable resilience of the tourism sector and its continuing significance within the global economy. Despite economic uncertainty, geopolitical tensions, inflationary pressures, and

environmental challenges, tourism remains one of the world's most dynamic economic sectors.

However, the nature of tourism has changed considerably compared with previous decades. Traditional mass tourism, characterized by standardized products and passive sightseeing experiences, is increasingly being replaced by more personalized, experience-oriented, and transformative forms of travel. Contemporary tourists seek authentic encounters, meaningful cultural engagement, personal enrichment, and opportunities for self-development. As a result, destinations are increasingly competing not only through physical attractions but also through their ability to create memorable experiences and emotional connections with visitors. **Figure 1** illustrates the busy atmosphere of Suvarnabhumi Airport reflects the scale of international mobility and global tourism connectivity in the twenty-first century.



Figure 1. Passenger Flow at Suvarnabhumi Airport
Source: Siksamat via Vecteezy

The growing importance of experience-based tourism can be understood through the broader transition from an industrial economy to an experience economy. In this context, tourists increasingly value unique experiences, local authenticity, cultural immersion, and participation in community life. Tourism products are therefore shifting from tangible services toward experiential and symbolic consumption. Visitors are no longer satisfied with simply observing cultural attractions; they increasingly desire opportunities to interact with local communities, learn traditional practices, participate in cultural events, and co-create experiences. This transformation has elevated culture from a supporting tourism resource to a central driver of destination competitiveness.

Another defining characteristic of twenty-first-century tourism is the rapid advancement of digital technology. Digital transformation has fundamentally changed how tourists search for information, make travel decisions, book services, share experiences, and evaluate destinations. Social media platforms, online travel agencies, artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, virtual reality (VR), and smart tourism technologies have become integral components of the contemporary tourism ecosystem **(Figure 2)**. These technologies not only influence tourist behavior but also reshape destination management, marketing strategies, and visitor experience design. Recent studies indicate that digital platforms and AI-driven systems contribute to operational efficiency, personalized service delivery, enhanced visitor experiences, and sustainable tourism management. Nevertheless, challenges associated with digital inequality, workforce adaptation, market concentration, data privacy, and governance continue to require careful policy attention (Leong et al., 2024; Gursoy, 2025; Zeqiri et al., 2025)



Figure 2. Digital Tourist Experience
Source: Subiyanto, Shvets and Apichodilok via Pexels

At the same time, sustainability has become one of the most critical issues confronting the tourism industry. Climate change, biodiversity loss, overtourism, environmental degradation, and social inequalities have challenged traditional growth-oriented tourism models. Increasingly, policymakers, industry leaders, and researchers advocate for more sustainable and regenerative approaches to tourism development. Contemporary tourism strategies emphasize balancing economic benefits with environmental stewardship, cultural preservation,

and community well-being. The growing prominence of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has further reinforced the need to align tourism development with broader sustainability objectives (Buhalis et al., 2023).

The post-pandemic period has also accelerated several structural changes within the tourism sector. Tourists have become more conscious of health, safety, wellness, and environmental responsibility. Demand for nature-based tourism, wellness tourism, cultural tourism, slow tourism, and transformative tourism experiences has increased significantly. Furthermore, hybrid forms of travel that combine leisure, work, education, and personal development have become increasingly common. These trends indicate that tourism is evolving beyond consumption-oriented travel toward more meaningful and purpose-driven experiences.

In this rapidly changing environment, culture has emerged as one of the most valuable strategic assets available to destinations. While physical infrastructure and tourism facilities can often be replicated, cultural resources are unique, place-specific, and deeply embedded within local identities and histories. This shift has given rise to the concept of cultural capital tourism, which recognizes culture not merely as a tourism attraction but as a productive resource capable of generating economic, social, cultural, and symbolic value.

For Thailand, these global transformations present both opportunities and challenges. The country's rich cultural heritage, world-renowned hospitality, gastronomy, wellness traditions, religious practices, festivals, and creative industries

position it favorably within the emerging experience economy. Simultaneously, increasing competition, technological disruption, environmental pressures, and changing visitor expectations require innovative approaches to tourism management. Understanding tourism within the context of these twenty-first-century transformations is therefore essential for developing effective strategies that leverage cultural capital and soft power while promoting sustainable and inclusive tourism development.

1.2 Culture as a Strategic Resource

In the contemporary global economy, culture is increasingly recognized as a strategic resource that contributes to economic development, social cohesion, innovation, international competitiveness, and sustainable tourism. Traditionally, culture was often perceived as a symbolic expression of identity, heritage, and collective memory. However, the twenty-first century has witnessed a significant transformation in how culture is understood and utilized within public policy, development planning, and destination management (Lopez-Guzman & Gonzalez Santa-Cruz, 2016; Kumar, 2017).

This shift reflects broader transformations in the global economy. As nations transition from industrial and manufacturing-based development toward knowledge-intensive, creative, and experience-driven economies, intangible assets have become increasingly important sources of value creation. In this context, culture functions not merely as a social good but

also as a productive asset capable of generating economic, social, and symbolic benefits. Cultural resources contribute to innovation, creativity, place competitiveness, social cohesion, and sustainable development outcomes **(Figure 3)**. Recognizing these contributions, UNESCO has increasingly emphasized culture as a global public good and an essential component of sustainable development, economic resilience, and social inclusion (Throsby, 2017; UNESCO, 2026).



Figure 3. Creative Economy and Cultural Arts
Source: UNESCO and MGR Online

The growing recognition of culture as a strategic resource can be observed across multiple dimensions. Economically, cultural assets contribute directly to employment generation, entrepreneurship, innovation, investment attraction, and tourism development. Cultural and creative industries have become significant contributors to local, regional, and national economies. These industries generate substantial economic value, create employment opportunities, stimulate innovation, and support economic diversification. Beyond their direct economic effects, cultural resources enhance destination attractiveness, strengthen place identity, and improve competitiveness in an increasingly crowded global tourism marketplace as drivers of economic growth (Alberti & Giusti, 2012; Foroudi et al., 2020; OECD, 2022; UNCTAD, 2024).



Figure 4. Culture, Place, and Competitiveness
Source: Shipulin, González, Wu and Son via Pexels

From a tourism perspective, culture has become one of the most important determinants of destination differentiation. While physical infrastructure, accommodation facilities, and transportation systems can often be replicated by competing destinations, cultural resources are inherently place-specific and deeply embedded within local contexts. Historical narratives, traditions, festivals, culinary practices, religious beliefs, local lifestyles, and artistic expressions provide distinctive experiences that cannot easily be reproduced elsewhere **(Figure 4)**. As a result, culture serves as a source of competitive advantage by enhancing authenticity, uniqueness, and destination identity (Nag & Mishra, 2023; OECD, 2022). Contemporary cultural tourism has evolved beyond a traditional focus on monuments, museums, and heritage sites toward more immersive, participatory, and experience-based forms of engagement. Increasingly, tourists seek meaningful interactions with local communities, opportunities for cultural co-creation, and experiences rooted in intangible cultural heritage, everyday life, and creative expression (Qiu et al., 2022; Leong et al., 2024). This transformation has reinforced the strategic importance of culture in destination development and tourism competitiveness.

The strategic importance of culture extends beyond its economic value. Culture also plays a fundamental role in promoting social sustainability by strengthening community identity, preserving local knowledge and traditions, fostering social cohesion, and enhancing collective well-being (UNESCO, 2024; Zabulis et al., 2025) **(Figure 5)**. Cultural heritage and cultural practices provide communities with a sense of continuity and belonging, reinforcing social bonds and facilitating the

transmission of knowledge across generations. Communities that actively engage in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage often demonstrate greater resilience in responding to social, economic, and environmental challenges (Göçer et al., 2024; Wardekker et al., 2023). Furthermore, culture contributes to community resilience by encouraging participation, strengthening social capital, and supporting adaptive capacities in times of change (Wardekker et al., 2023). Increasingly, international organizations and scholars recognize that sustainable development cannot be achieved solely through economic growth but requires the integration of cultural dimensions into development planning and policy frameworks. Consequently, culture is increasingly regarded as an essential component of sustainable and inclusive development (UNESCO, 2024).



Figure 5. Thai Wellness Culture
Source: Miroshnichenko via Pexels

Culture has also emerged as a critical component of soft power in the twenty-first century. In an increasingly interconnected and competitive global environment, nations strategically utilize cultural resources to shape international perceptions, strengthen national reputation, and enhance global influence (Nye, 2022; Vasist & Krishnan, 2024). Soft power derives from a country's ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, with culture representing one of its principal sources (Nye, 2022). Tourism serves as a particularly effective channel for communicating cultural soft power because it enables international visitors to encounter a country's culture directly through local communities, cultural events, creative products, and heritage resources (Casado Claro et al., 2023) **(Figure 6)**. Through these experiences, tourism can facilitate cultural exchange, reinforce destination and country image, and enhance a nation's capacity to project attractiveness and influence internationally (Casado Claro et al., 2023; Hajjaj et al., 2024; Vasist & Krishnan, 2024).



Figure 6. Yao Wa Rat (Bangkok China Town)
Source: Margarita K via Pexels

The relationship between culture and tourism has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades. Traditionally, cultural tourism focused primarily on the consumption of tangible heritage assets, including monuments, museums, historic districts, and archaeological attractions. Contemporary approaches, however, increasingly emphasize creative, participatory, and experience-based engagement with both tangible and intangible cultural resources (Islam & Sadhukhan, 2024). Cultural resources are therefore no longer regarded merely as objects of observation but are increasingly interpreted, revitalized, and integrated into broader strategies for visitor engagement, place-making, local development, and

destination differentiation (OECD, 2022). This evolution has shifted the focus of tourism management from simply attracting visitors toward managing cultural assets in ways that balance heritage conservation, community interests, visitor experiences, and economic opportunities (Nag & Mishra, 2023). Consequently, effective governance, stakeholder collaboration, and community participation have become critical to preserving destination authenticity and distinctiveness while supporting the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of cultural tourism destinations (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025)

Thailand provides a particularly relevant example of culture functioning as a strategic resource. The country's tourism competitiveness is strongly influenced by its cultural heritage, gastronomy, religious traditions, wellness practices, festivals, hospitality culture, and creative industries. These cultural assets contribute not only to tourism revenue but also to national branding, international reputation, and soft power development. Thai cuisine, Thai massage, Muay Thai **(Figure 7)**, Buddhist heritage, and traditional festivals have become globally recognized symbols that influence travel decisions and shape international perceptions of Thailand.

As tourism increasingly shifts toward experience-oriented and meaning-driven consumption, the strategic importance of culture is likely to grow further. Future tourism competitiveness will depend not only on the availability of attractions but also on destinations' ability to preserve, interpret, innovate, and communicate their cultural resources in ways that create value for visitors while supporting sustainable and

inclusive development. In this regard, culture should no longer be viewed merely as a legacy inherited from the past; rather, it should be understood as a dynamic strategic asset capable of shaping the future of tourism, development, and international competitiveness.



Figure 7. Muay Thai Boxing
Source: Monsalvo via Pexels

1.3 Cultural Capital and Tourism Development

The growing importance of culture in contemporary development has led to increasing recognition of cultural capital as a valuable framework for understanding tourism development. While culture broadly encompasses the values, beliefs, traditions, knowledge systems, practices, and creative expressions that

characterize a society, cultural capital refers to accumulated cultural resources that can generate social, economic, symbolic, and developmental value. The concept originated in the work of Bourdieu (1986), who argued that culture functions as a form of capital that can be accumulated, transmitted, and converted into social and economic advantages. Although Bourdieu's original formulation was developed primarily to explain social distinction, inequality, and the reproduction of advantage among individuals and social groups, subsequent scholarship has extended the concept to communities, regions, and territories (Panzera, 2022).

Contemporary perspectives increasingly view cultural capital as a collective and place-based asset embedded within the historical experiences, cultural practices, creative capacities, knowledge systems, and social institutions of a community. From this perspective, cultural capital extends beyond heritage preservation and cultural identity to become a productive resource capable of supporting creativity, innovation, economic development, social participation, and local well-being. Cultural resources therefore generate value not only through their historical or symbolic significance but also through their capacity to encourage participation, strengthen local identity, stimulate cultural and creative activities, and contribute to sustainable development processes (OECD, 2022).

Within tourism, cultural capital provides an important lens through which to understand how destinations create and sustain distinctiveness in increasingly competitive markets. Unlike standardized infrastructure, technology, or tourism

facilities, cultural capital is deeply embedded within local contexts and is difficult for competing destinations to reproduce authentically. Historical narratives, traditional knowledge, cultural landscapes, artistic expressions, local lifestyles, and community values collectively shape the character of a destination and influence how it is perceived and experienced by visitors **(Figure 8)**. Cultural heritage and territorial identity can reinforce tourism attractiveness while generating broader benefits for local socioeconomic development. When strategically mobilized through community participation, creative tourism, and collaborative destination management, cultural capital can also strengthen local identity, support cultural revitalization, and contribute to destination resilience and sustainability (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025). As a result, cultural capital contributes not only to destination attractiveness but also to place identity, reputation, and long-term competitiveness.



Figure 8. Cultural Learning through Thai Weaving
Source: Fernando B M via Pexels

The relationship between cultural capital and tourism has become increasingly significant as contemporary tourism evolves from a model centered on sightseeing and consumption toward one characterized by participation, learning, and meaningful engagement. Modern travelers increasingly seek opportunities to interact with local communities, experience cultural traditions, explore creative activities, and gain deeper insights into local ways of life. This shift has elevated the importance of cultural resources that facilitate cultural exchange, storytelling, interpretation, and experiential learning. Consequently, tourism development increasingly depends upon a destination's ability to mobilize cultural capital in ways that

generate meaningful experiences while maintaining cultural integrity and local relevance.

From a destination perspective, cultural capital exists in multiple interconnected forms. Some forms are embedded within physical environments, including heritage buildings, archaeological sites, museums, cultural landscapes, and historic districts. Others are embedded within living cultural practices such as festivals, performing arts, gastronomy, craftsmanship, rituals, languages, and traditional knowledge systems. The value of cultural capital emerges not from these elements in isolation but from the relationships among them. Physical heritage acquires significance through the stories, meanings, and practices associated with it, while living traditions gain visibility and continuity through their connection to place. Together, these resources form cultural ecosystems that support both cultural continuity and tourism development.

One of the most significant contributions of cultural capital to tourism lies in its ability to create differentiation. In an increasingly globalized tourism marketplace, destinations frequently offer similar accommodation facilities, transportation networks, and recreational amenities. Cultural capital, however, remains inherently place-specific because it is rooted in local histories, identities, and social relationships. This uniqueness enables destinations to develop distinctive narratives and experiences that are difficult for competitors to imitate **(Figure 9)**. Consequently, cultural capital functions as a strategic resource that supports destination positioning, strengthens visitor attachment, and enhances long-term competitiveness.



Figure 9. Uniqueness of Thai Culture
Source: trueplookpanya.com

The value of cultural capital extends beyond tourism demand and economic performance. Cultural resources can contribute to community development by reinforcing local identity, supporting cultural transmission, encouraging civic participation, and strengthening social cohesion. Tourism can play an important role in this process by creating incentives for cultural preservation, revitalization, and innovation. When appropriately managed and supported by community participation, tourism can provide opportunities for local people to maintain cultural traditions, celebrate local heritage, and share cultural knowledge with wider audiences (Le et al., 2024; OECD, 2022). In this way, cultural capital can contribute simultaneously to economic vitality, cultural continuity, community well-being, and social resilience.

Nevertheless, the relationship between cultural capital and tourism also presents significant challenges. The increasing commercialization of culture may result in the commodification, simplification, or transformation of traditions, heritage, and cultural practices for tourism consumption (Alamineh et al., 2023). Excessive tourism development and visitor pressure may threaten cultural authenticity, disrupt community life, and undermine the cultural resources upon which tourism depends. Cultural capital should therefore not be viewed solely as an economic asset but as a living and evolving resource that requires careful stewardship, community participation, and appropriate institutional support. Sustainable tourism development consequently requires a context-sensitive balance between utilization and preservation, innovation and continuity, and visitor experiences and community well-being.

As tourism continues to evolve toward more experience-oriented, knowledge-intensive, and sustainability-focused forms of consumption, cultural capital is likely to become increasingly important in destination development. The long-term success of cultural tourism destinations is likely to depend not only on the quantity or diversity of cultural resources they possess but also on their capacity to interpret, manage, safeguard, and continuously revitalize those resources (OECD, 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). Understanding cultural capital therefore provides valuable insights into how destinations can develop tourism systems that are economically productive, culturally sustainable, socially inclusive, and resilient.

1.4 Soft Power and Tourism

The growing interconnectedness of the contemporary world has fundamentally altered the ways in which nations compete for influence, legitimacy, and international recognition. In addition to economic performance and political power, countries increasingly rely on their capacity to attract, inspire, and engage international audiences. This ability to shape preferences and influence outcomes through attraction rather than coercion is commonly described as soft power (Nye, 2004, 2022). Culture, political values, institutions, and the perceived legitimacy of national policies constitute important sources of such influence. Although originally developed within international relations, the concept has become increasingly relevant to tourism because tourism provides a direct and experiential channel through which nations communicate their

identities and cultural appeal to international audiences (Casado Claro et al., 2023).

Unlike conventional diplomacy, which is often conducted through governments and formal institutions, tourism also operates through interpersonal interaction and lived experience. Visitors encounter destinations through their landscapes, heritage, cuisine, cultural practices, creative industries, local communities, and everyday social environments. These encounters influence perceptions of destinations and contribute to broader impressions of the countries in which they are located. Tourism therefore functions not merely as an economic sector but also as a form of public and cultural diplomacy through which national identities are interpreted, experienced, and communicated across cultural boundaries (Casado Claro et al., 2023).

The relationship between tourism and soft power has become increasingly significant as globalization has intensified competition among destinations. Countries no longer compete solely through infrastructure, accessibility, price, or service quality; they also compete through symbolic resources, cultural appeal, reputation, and the capacity to establish emotional and cognitive connections with international audiences (Vasist & Krishnan, 2024). Tourism contributes to this process by transforming cultural and symbolic resources into experiences that can foster familiarity, interest, trust, and attraction. The influence generated through tourism is therefore not imposed but develops through voluntary engagement, cultural exchange, and personal experience.

Culture remains one of the principal foundations of tourism-related soft power. Cultural heritage, festivals, cuisine, artistic production, creative industries, values, and everyday cultural practices provide resources through which countries express their identities and communicate with external audiences. Cultural capital and soft power are therefore closely interconnected: cultural capital provides the distinctive resources through which destinations express their uniqueness, while soft power represents the influence generated when those resources create favorable perceptions and greater attraction among international audiences (Nye, 2022).

Recent technological transformations have further expanded tourism's role in soft-power formation. Social media platforms, digital storytelling, online communities, and user-generated content have increased the speed, reach, and interactivity with which tourism experiences circulate internationally **(Figure 10)**. Destination images are consequently no longer produced exclusively by governments or destination marketing organizations. They are increasingly co-created through the photographs, videos, reviews, narratives, comments, and interactions shared by travelers, residents, tourism businesses, and online communities (Huang et al., 2024). Tourists therefore become active participants in shaping the visibility, image, and international reputation of destinations and nations.



Figure 10. The Power of Social Media
Source: famesolutely.com

Tourism contributes to nation branding not only through official campaigns but also through the experiences, narratives, and images circulated by visitors, cultural-event participants, and digital content creators. Encounters with local communities, festivals, cuisine, heritage, and everyday cultural life provide visitors with experiential evidence through which they interpret a destination and form broader impressions of the country. Cultural events are particularly influential because they function

as participatory spaces where national identity is communicated through cultural performance, social interaction, and shared experience. When such encounters generate favorable impressions, they can strengthen destination differentiation, international goodwill, and the perceived attractiveness of the nation (Intason, 2026).

The growing influence of digital platforms has made this branding process increasingly decentralized and participatory. Short-form videos, travel narratives, online reviews, and influencer-generated content can circulate destination images rapidly across international audiences, shaping attitudes, electronic word of mouth, and travel intentions (Cachulo Pereira & Mendes Bacalhau, 2026; Pourazad et al., 2025). Tourists and content creators therefore operate as informal cultural intermediaries who interpret places for global audiences and contribute to the continuous negotiation of national image. Nation branding in tourism is consequently no longer produced solely by governments or destination marketing organizations but is increasingly co-created through interactions among public institutions, tourism businesses, residents, visitors, festivals, creators, and digital communities.

As competition for global attention and positive recognition intensifies, the effectiveness of tourism-related soft power will increasingly depend on a country's ability to facilitate authentic cultural encounters and encourage credible narratives that international audiences are willing to engage with and share. This perspective extends tourism's role beyond generating arrivals and expenditure. Tourism becomes an evolving arena of

cultural communication through which destinations can cultivate familiarity, emotional connection, international goodwill, and reputational value. However, these outcomes require inclusive cultural representation, meaningful community participation, responsible digital communication, and consistency between the images promoted internationally and the realities experienced by visitors.

1.5 Thailand as a Global Tourism Destination

Thailand has long occupied a prominent position within the global tourism landscape, attracting international visitors from diverse geographical, cultural, and demographic backgrounds. Although the country's tourism appeal is commonly associated with its tropical landscapes, accessibility, hospitality, and relative affordability, these factors provide only a partial explanation of its enduring attractiveness. A more comprehensive explanation lies in Thailand's ability to mobilize its cultural capital and transform it into a diverse portfolio of tourism experiences. Thai cuisine, festivals, wellness traditions, Muay Thai, handicrafts, creative industries, religious practices, and local lifestyles have increasingly been interpreted and communicated as experiential resources that generate economic value, international visibility, and cultural influence (TAT, 2025).

The development of Thailand's tourism sector also reflects broader changes in international tourism demand. Coastal attractions, tropical environments, and leisure-oriented travel remain important components of the country's tourism economy. However, contemporary tourism policy increasingly emphasizes a transition from volume-driven growth toward quality, balance, sustainability, and meaningful visitor experiences. Current strategies seek to develop creative and thematic tourism, distribute visitors more evenly across regions and seasons, promote lesser-known destinations, and design tourism products around local identity and cultural distinctiveness (TAT, 2025). This diversification is intended to strengthen destination resilience by broadening Thailand's tourism markets, reducing the spatial concentration of visitor flows, and creating opportunities for value generation across multiple tourism segments and localities.

From the perspective of cultural capital, Thailand possesses a rich and highly diversified resource base. The Historic City of Ayutthaya **(Figure 11),** which served as the second capital of Siam, reflects Thailand's historical position as an important centre of political authority, international diplomacy, commerce, religion, and cultural exchange. Similarly, Sukhothai and its associated historic towns preserve important evidence of the development of early Siamese architecture, Buddhist art, language, governance, water management, and cultural identity (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026). Beyond these internationally recognized heritage cities, Buddhist temples, religious rituals, culinary knowledge, festivals, crafts, traditional healing practices, and community lifestyles continue to provide living cultural resources through which visitors encounter and interpret Thai society. Collectively, these tangible and intangible forms of cultural capital contribute to Thailand's destination identity and provide the foundations for cultural, spiritual, gastronomic, wellness, creative, and community-based tourism.



Figure 11. Ayutthaya Heritage City
Source: famesolutely.com

Among the various forms of cultural capital, gastronomy has emerged as one of Thailand's most influential assets. Thai cuisine functions not only as a tourism attraction but also as a globally recognized cultural ambassador. The international popularity of dishes such as *Tom Yum Goong, Pad Thai, and Som Tum* **(Figure 12)** has contributed significantly to Thailand's global visibility and destination image. Food experiences increasingly influence travel decisions, and culinary tourism has become an important mechanism through which visitors engage with local culture, traditions, and regional identities. In this sense, gastronomy represents both a tourism product and a form of cultural diplomacy that extends Thailand's influence beyond its borders.



Figure 12. Tom Yum Goong, Som Tum, and Pad Thai
Source: Kim and Leung via Pexels

Wellness tourism provides another important illustration of how cultural capital contributes to destination development. Traditional Thai massage, herbal remedies, Buddhist-inspired contemplative practices, and holistic approaches to health are rooted in local knowledge systems and long-established cultural practices. Nuad Thai, for example, is recognized as part of the art, science, and culture of traditional Thai healthcare and represents a body of knowledge historically transmitted through

families, communities, and professional practice (UNESCO, 2019). As international demand for preventive health, self-care, longevity, and transformative travel continues to expand, Thailand has increasingly integrated these cultural resources with contemporary spas, wellness retreats, medical-wellness facilities, and personalized health services. Recent industry data indicate that Thailand's wellness tourism market reached approximately USD 14 billion in 2024, following substantial growth from the previous year (Global Wellness Institute, 2026). Thailand's wellness sector therefore demonstrates how traditional knowledge can be adapted to contemporary visitor expectations while retaining cultural meaning and providing opportunities for continued practice, innovation, and transmission.

Thailand's tourism competitiveness is also shaped by less tangible and more relational dimensions of cultural capital. Service mannerisms, interpersonal courtesy, cultural expressions, atmosphere, and cuisine influence how visitors experience and interpret Thainess within tourism and hospitality settings. Research on five-star hotels in Thailand identifies mannerism, atmosphere, cuisine, and culture as interconnected dimensions of Thainess, with the mannerisms of service providers exerting a particularly strong influence on guest impressions (Vejjajiva et al., 2023). These encounters can contribute to the affective dimension of Thailand's destination image, which has been found to play an important role in visitors' intentions to revisit and recommend the country (Sodawan & Hsu, 2025).

The familiar representation of Thailand as the *"Land of Smiles"* **(Figure 13)** may therefore be understood as a tourism

narrative constructed through repeated encounters, hospitality practices, promotional communication, and visitors' emotional interpretations of the destination. Rather than treating hospitality or smiling as fixed characteristics shared uniformly by all Thai people, this perspective recognizes them as socially produced and context-dependent forms of cultural expression. Such intangible resources demonstrate that cultural capital extends beyond monuments and heritage attractions to include the values, practices, service interactions, and emotional qualities through which visitors experience relationships with host communities.



Figure 13. Thailand, The Land of Smile
Source: www.theluxurysignature.com

The importance of Thailand's cultural capital extends beyond tourism demand and economic performance. Increasingly, cultural resources contribute to the country's soft power by shaping international perceptions and strengthening national reputation. Through tourism, these cultural assets become accessible to international audiences, creating opportunities for cultural exchange, nation branding, and international influence. Tourism therefore functions as a bridge connecting cultural capital with soft power outcomes.

Nevertheless, sustaining Thailand's position as a leading global tourism destination requires addressing a number of emerging challenges. Environmental pressures, climate change, overtourism, labor shortages, digital transformation, and increasing regional competition are reshaping the tourism landscape. At the same time, growing demand for authenticity, sustainability, and meaningful experiences places greater emphasis on the responsible management of cultural resources. These challenges highlight the need to balance economic objectives with cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and community well-being.

Looking toward the future, Thailand's tourism competitiveness will depend less on expanding visitor numbers and more on enhancing the value generated through tourism **(Figure 14)**. The country's extensive cultural capital provides a strong foundation for achieving this objective. However, long-term success will require strategic approaches that integrate cultural preservation, innovation, sustainability, and soft power into tourism planning and destination management. In an increasingly experience-driven global tourism economy, the ability to transform cultural resources into meaningful, distinctive, and sustainable experiences will remain one of Thailand's most important competitive advantages.



Figure 14. Thailand Blueprint for Tourism
Source: www.thailand.go.th

Thailand's significance as a global tourism destination therefore extends beyond its economic contribution or visitor arrivals. The country's experience demonstrates how cultural capital can be mobilized to support tourism development, strengthen national identity, generate international influence, and create long-term competitive advantages. As tourism continues to evolve, Thailand offers an important case through which the relationships among cultural capital, soft power, and destination development can be better understood.

Chapter 2
Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Capital and Soft Power

2.1 Cultural Capital Theory

Cultural capital theory provides an influential framework for understanding how cultural resources shape power, social position, inequality, and access to opportunities. Developed through the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the concept challenged explanations of social advantage based exclusively on income, property, or other forms of economic capital. Bourdieu argued that social life is structured through the interaction of several forms of capital, particularly economic, social, and cultural capital. Within this framework, culture is not merely a reflection of society or a matter of personal preference. It can function as a resource that is accumulated, transmitted, recognized, and, under certain conditions, converted into social or economic advantage (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu developed cultural capital primarily to explain the persistence and reproduction of social inequality. Educational institutions, for example, do not necessarily evaluate all forms of knowledge and cultural expression equally. They frequently recognize particular linguistic abilities, dispositions, cultural competencies, modes of communication, and forms of knowledge as legitimate. Individuals raised in social environments where these valued competencies are readily available may therefore enter educational institutions with advantages that appear to reflect individual ability but are partly

derived from prior socialization. Cultural capital consequently helps explain how privilege can be transmitted across generations and reproduced through institutions that appear formally open and meritocratic.

A central contribution of Bourdieu's framework is the distinction among embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital consists of knowledge, language, skills, tastes, values, dispositions, and ways of interpreting the world that individuals acquire through family life, education, social interaction, and participation in cultural activities. Because these attributes become incorporated into the individual, their acquisition normally requires time, learning, and repeated practice.

Objectified cultural capital refers to cultural goods and material expressions such as books, artworks, musical instruments, archives, artifacts, and other objects that embody cultural meaning. Ownership of such objects may be transferred, but the ability to understand, appreciate, or use them often depends on the embodied cultural capital of the individual. Institutionalized cultural capital refers primarily to formally recognized qualifications and credentials that certify particular forms of knowledge or competence. Academic degrees, professional qualifications, and comparable forms of recognition enable cultural competencies to be evaluated and exchanged more consistently within education and employment systems (Bourdieu, 1986; Reed & Johnson, 2023).

Taken together, these three forms demonstrate that cultural advantage does not arise solely from possessing cultural

objects or receiving formal education. It also depends on the competencies required to interpret cultural resources and on institutions that determine which forms of culture are legitimate and valuable. Cultural capital therefore operates relationally: its value depends upon the social field in which it is recognized. A form of knowledge, behaviour, qualification, or cultural expression that carries considerable value in one context may have much less value in another.

Although Bourdieu's original formulation was principally concerned with individuals, social classes, education, and the reproduction of inequality, the language of cultural capital has subsequently been adopted in cultural economics, regional development, heritage studies, and tourism. This expansion requires conceptual care. In cultural economics, cultural capital commonly refers to cultural assets that embody cultural value and may generate both cultural and economic benefits over time. This interpretation is related to, but distinct from, Bourdieu's sociological emphasis on social distinction and unequal access to valued cultural resources (Throsby, 2001).

The economic interpretation recognizes that heritage buildings, cultural landscapes, artworks, traditions, cultural institutions, and bodies of knowledge may be treated as assets because they provide continuing flows of cultural, social, and economic value. Their importance cannot be assessed solely through market prices because they may also possess historical, spiritual, aesthetic, symbolic, educational, and identity-related significance. Cultural capital therefore differs from conventional physical capital: the consumption, alteration, or loss of a cultural

asset may have consequences that cannot be fully reversed or compensated through financial investment.

Contemporary place-based perspectives extend this discussion by examining culture as a territorial resource embedded within particular communities, cities, and regions. Cultural heritage, collective memory, local knowledge, creative capabilities, artistic practices, institutions, and cultural participation can contribute to territorial identity and influence how places develop and differentiate themselves. Research on cultural heritage and regional development indicates that cultural resources can support tourism attractiveness, local identity, socioeconomic activity, and wider development benefits when they are connected to appropriate institutions and development strategies (Panzera, 2022).

This place-based interpretation does not imply that an entire community possesses a single, uniform form of cultural capital. Communities contain different groups with unequal levels of power, recognition, participation, and access to cultural resources. Decisions about which traditions are preserved, whose history is presented, and which cultural expressions receive investment are therefore inherently political. Applying cultural capital at the collective level must retain Bourdieu's concern with inequality, legitimacy, and control rather than treating local culture as an uncontested collection of tourism assets.

Recent scholarship and policy frameworks increasingly employ an ecosystem perspective to explain how cultural value is produced. From this perspective, cultural capital is not simply a static inventory of monuments, traditions, or cultural products.

It is sustained through relationships among artists, cultural practitioners, residents, educational institutions, government agencies, businesses, audiences, technologies, and places. Cultural resources remain meaningful and productive through continued practice, interpretation, participation, transmission, and adaptation. UNESCO (2022), for example, emphasizes the importance of creative ecosystems supported by participatory governance, cultural diversity, artistic freedom, and sustainable cultural policies. Similarly, the OECD (2022) demonstrates that cultural and creative activities can contribute to employment, entrepreneurship, innovation, local development, social inclusion, place attractiveness, and well-being.

This ecosystem perspective also highlights that cultural capital can be strengthened, weakened, or transformed. Cultural knowledge may diminish when transmission between generations is disrupted, while cultural institutions may decline when financial resources, participation, or public support are insufficient. Conversely, education, community participation, creative entrepreneurship, digital technologies, and appropriate policy interventions may generate new opportunities for cultural expression and renewal. Cultural capital should therefore be understood as a living and evolving resource rather than a fixed inheritance from the past.

Within tourism studies, cultural capital provides a valuable lens for examining how destinations create identity, distinctiveness, and visitor experiences. Heritage sites, cultural landscapes, gastronomy, festivals, crafts, performing arts, religious traditions, creative industries, local knowledge, and

everyday lifestyles may all contribute to the cultural character of a destination. However, these resources do not automatically become tourism value. They must be interpreted, communicated, organized, and connected to tourism experiences through the participation of communities, cultural practitioners, businesses, and public institutions.

Tourism consequently represents one mechanism through which cultural capital may be activated and converted into other forms of value. Cultural knowledge may be transformed into visitor experiences; heritage resources may support local enterprises; and cultural participation may strengthen identity, social relationships, and community capabilities. Evidence from community-based creative tourism in Thailand illustrates how cultural capital can interact with human, social, natural, and institutional resources to support cultural preservation, stakeholder collaboration, local development, and community resilience (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, conversion into tourism or economic value is neither automatic nor inherently beneficial. Cultural resources may be unevenly controlled, and the resulting benefits may not be distributed fairly. Tourism development may also simplify cultural meanings, privilege commercially attractive expressions, exclude certain groups, or transform living traditions into standardized products. Cultural capital theory therefore encourages tourism scholars to examine not only the amount of cultural resources available but also who possesses them, who defines their value, who controls their representation, and who benefits from their transformation.

The continuing relevance of cultural capital theory lies in its capacity to connect culture with questions of power, value, identity, development, and institutional recognition. At the individual level, it explains how cultural competencies affect educational and social opportunities. At the community and territorial levels, carefully adapted interpretations help explain how heritage, knowledge, creativity, participation, and institutions contribute to place-based development. Within tourism, the framework clarifies how cultural resources are mobilized and converted into experiential, symbolic, social, and economic value.

Cultural capital theory thus provides more than a justification for using culture as a development resource. It also provides a critical framework for assessing access, ownership, recognition, conversion, and benefit distribution. This dual perspective is particularly important for sustainable tourism development, which must generate economic opportunities while safeguarding cultural meaning, supporting community agency, and maintaining the capacity of cultural resources to be transmitted, interpreted, and renewed by future generations.

2.2 Bourdieu's Framework

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework **(Figure 15)** represents one of the most influential attempts to explain how social inequalities are produced, maintained, and reproduced within society. Rejecting explanations based solely on economic resources, Bourdieu argued that power operates through a combination of economic, social, and cultural resources that

shape individual opportunities and social outcomes. His framework provides a relational understanding of society in which individuals and groups occupy different positions according to the resources they possess and their ability to mobilize those resources within specific social contexts (Bourdieu, 1986).

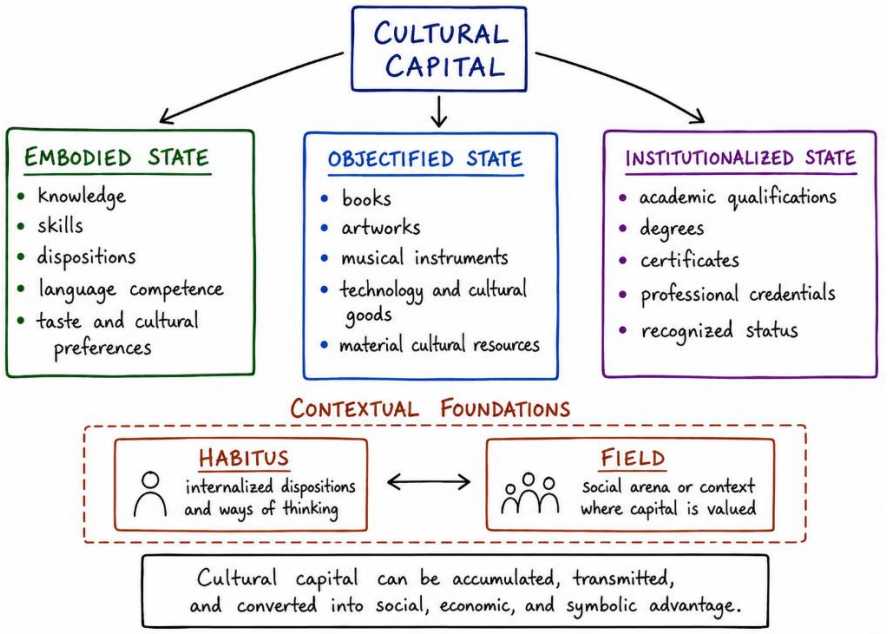


Figure 15. Bourdieu's Framework of Cultural Capital
Source: Conceptualized by the authors based on Bourdieu (1986), with visual assistance from OpenAI.

At the core of Bourdieu's sociology are three closely interconnected concepts: capital, habitus, and field. These concepts should not be treated as independent components or isolated variables. Rather, they operate relationally to explain how social structures shape individual action, how individuals navigate different social environments, and how patterns of advantage and inequality are reproduced or transformed over time. Their interaction forms the foundation of Bourdieu's theory of practice and provides the broader theoretical context within which cultural capital should be understood (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The concept of capital extends beyond its conventional economic meaning. Economic capital consists of financial resources, property, and material assets that can be directly converted into monetary value. Bourdieu argued, however, that individuals and groups also possess social and cultural resources that influence their positions within society. Social capital refers to actual or potential resources accessible through durable networks, relationships, memberships, and social connections. Cultural capital includes knowledge, linguistic competencies, skills, dispositions, qualifications, and familiarity with culturally valued practices. These forms of capital may be accumulated, transmitted, exchanged, and, under particular conditions, converted into one another (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu also developed the concept of symbolic capital to explain how resources acquire legitimacy, prestige, authority, and recognition. Symbolic capital is not necessarily a completely separate category of resource. Rather, economic, social, or

cultural capital may function as symbolic capital when it is recognized as legitimate and valuable by others within a particular social context. An academic degree, artistic reputation, professional title, or prestigious social connection, for example, carries influence because institutions and social actors collectively recognize its significance. The power of capital therefore depends not only on its possession but also on the social recognition attached to it.

A second central concept is habitus. Habitus refers to a system of durable and transferable dispositions through which individuals perceive, interpret, evaluate, and respond to the social world. These dispositions develop through accumulated life experiences and are shaped by family background, education, social class, cultural participation, occupation, and other social environments. Habitus influences tastes, preferences, aspirations, expectations, bodily conduct, and practical judgments, frequently without requiring deliberate or fully conscious calculation (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

Habitus should not, however, be interpreted as a rigid set of rules that completely determines behaviour. It provides individuals with practical orientations and predispositions rather than fixed instructions. People may respond differently to similar circumstances because their dispositions have been formed through different social histories. Habitus also enables improvisation and adaptation, although such responses normally occur within the range of possibilities that individuals perceive as realistic, appropriate, or achievable. It therefore connects past

social experience with present practice while leaving room for agency, learning, and change.

The third component of the framework is field. A field is a relatively structured social space in which individuals and organizations occupy different positions and compete or cooperate over particular resources, opportunities, and forms of recognition. Examples include educational, political, economic, artistic, religious, scientific, cultural, and tourism fields. Each field develops its own interests, institutional arrangements, accepted practices, power relations, and criteria for determining what is valuable or legitimate (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

A field should therefore not be understood merely as a physical location, economic sector, or formal organization. It is a relational configuration of positions shaped by the distribution of capital among participating actors. Universities, government agencies, cultural institutions, businesses, professional associations, communities, and individuals may occupy different positions within the same field, depending on the volume and composition of capital they possess. Their relationships are structured by both cooperation and competition over the resources and forms of recognition considered important within that field.

The value of capital is consequently field-specific. A resource that carries substantial value in one field may have limited influence in another. Academic qualifications may provide considerable institutional and symbolic value within education, while artistic reputation, practical knowledge, community legitimacy, political authority, or financial resources

may be more influential in other contexts. Success therefore depends not only on how much capital an actor possesses but also on whether the type of capital is recognized, relevant, and convertible within the field concerned.

The relationship among capital, habitus, and field is central to Bourdieu's theory of practice. Individuals enter social fields with different volumes and combinations of economic, social, and cultural capital. Their habitus influences how they interpret the field, recognize opportunities, evaluate risks, and select possible courses of action. At the same time, the structure of the field determines which resources, competencies, behaviours, and identities are recognized and rewarded. Social practices and outcomes therefore emerge through the encounter between historically formed dispositions, available resources, and the structure of the social environment.

This relational perspective enables Bourdieu to move beyond explanations based solely on individual choice or structural determination. Individuals are neither entirely free actors making decisions independently of society nor passive subjects mechanically controlled by social structures. Their actions are enabled and constrained by their habitus, their position within a field, and the capital available to them. Practices may reproduce existing social arrangements, but they can also contribute to gradual transformation when fields change, new forms of capital gain recognition, or actors develop different strategies and dispositions.

Within this broader framework, cultural capital occupies a particularly significant position because it connects culture

with power and social recognition. Cultural knowledge, linguistic ability, educational competence, taste, and familiarity with legitimate cultural practices are not merely matters of personal preference. Their social value depends upon institutions and fields that recognize particular cultural expressions as appropriate, refined, professional, authentic, or authoritative. Cultural capital can therefore create advantages for individuals and groups whose competencies correspond with the expectations of powerful institutions (Bourdieu, 1986).

At the same time, the distribution and recognition of cultural capital contribute to the reproduction of social hierarchy. Educational and cultural institutions may present their standards as neutral while rewarding competencies more readily available to particular social groups. Advantages inherited through family socialization and cultural exposure may consequently be transformed into academic achievement, professional credentials, social status, and economic opportunity. Bourdieu's framework thus reveals that culture is not solely symbolic or aesthetic but is embedded in institutional arrangements and struggles over legitimacy.

The continuing influence of this framework can be observed across sociology, education, cultural studies, organizational research, communication, and other disciplines. Contemporary applications continue to employ field, capital, habitus, and symbolic capital to analyze relationships among knowledge, institutional authority, professional recognition, and power (Schirone, 2023). These applications demonstrate the adaptability of Bourdieu's framework, but they also require

researchers to preserve its relational foundation rather than treating capital as a simple inventory of assets.

This caution is especially important when the framework is extended from individuals and social classes to communities, organizations, cities, regions, or nations. Collective cultural resources such as heritage, traditions, local knowledge, creative capabilities, and cultural institutions may be analyzed as forms of cultural capital, but their value remains shaped by fields of power and systems of recognition. Researchers must therefore consider who controls cultural resources, whose cultural expressions are regarded as legitimate, how benefits are distributed, and which actors possess the authority to represent a community or destination.

Within tourism, for example, cultural resources acquire value through relationships among communities, cultural practitioners, public agencies, tourism businesses, visitors, and destination institutions. Local knowledge or cultural traditions do not automatically become valued tourism capital. They must be recognized, interpreted, communicated, and incorporated into tourism experiences within a field that contains unequal power relationships and competing interests. A Bourdieusian perspective therefore encourages analysis not only of the resources a destination possesses but also of how those resources are valued, represented, converted, and controlled.

The discussion of cultural capital should thus be situated within Bourdieu's wider theory of practice. Capital identifies the resources available to social actors; habitus explains the historically formed dispositions through which actors perceive

and respond to their circumstances; and field describes the structured social context in which resources and practices acquire meaning and value. Cultural capital represents one important component of this relational system rather than a self-contained theory operating independently from habitus and field.

To understand cultural capital more fully, it is therefore necessary to examine the specific forms through which it is acquired, embodied, possessed, recognized, and transmitted. Bourdieu distinguishes among embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital. These three forms, and their relevance to tourism and destination development, are discussed in the following sections.

2.2.1 Embodied Cultural Capital

Embodied cultural capital is the most deeply internalized form of cultural capital in Bourdieu's framework. It consists of knowledge, linguistic competencies, practical skills, tastes, values, dispositions, and culturally informed ways of perceiving and interpreting the world. These attributes are acquired through family socialization, education, cultural participation, professional practice, and accumulated life experience. Because they become incorporated into an individual's habitus, they cannot be transferred instantaneously in the same manner as money or physical property. Their acquisition requires time, personal involvement, and repeated practice (Bourdieu, 1986).

This does not mean that embodied cultural capital cannot be transmitted across generations. Rather, it is transmitted

indirectly through upbringing, observation, instruction, participation, and access to culturally valued environments. Families and educational institutions influence the language individuals use, the cultural activities to which they are exposed, the knowledge they acquire, and the expectations they develop. Embodied cultural capital may therefore appear to be an individual achievement while reflecting unequal access to learning opportunities and cultural resources.

A defining characteristic of embodied cultural capital is its dependence on personal investment. Acquiring language proficiency, artistic competence, professional expertise, cultural literacy, or familiarity with particular social conventions requires sustained learning and participation. The time and resources available for such investment are not distributed equally. Differences in family background, education, income, mobility, and access to cultural institutions consequently influence both the quantity and composition of embodied cultural capital individuals are able to acquire.

The value of embodied cultural capital is also context-dependent. Knowledge or behaviour that is highly valued in one social field may receive limited recognition in another. Academic language, knowledge of classical art, traditional ecological knowledge, culinary expertise, craft skills, or ritual competence may each carry different levels of legitimacy depending on the institutions and communities evaluating them. Embodied cultural capital therefore derives its social power not simply from what an individual knows or can do, but from whether those

competencies are recognized as legitimate and valuable within a particular context.

Within contemporary societies, embodied cultural capital influences patterns of cultural participation and consumption. Individuals draw upon prior knowledge, language abilities, aesthetic competencies, and accumulated experience when interpreting cultural meanings and engaging with museums, heritage sites, artistic performances, educational institutions, and other cultural settings. These competencies can affect what individuals notice, how confidently they participate, and the meanings they construct from cultural encounters.

In tourism, embodied cultural capital shapes how visitors select, interpret, and participate in cultural experiences. Tourists approach destinations with different educational backgrounds, cultural interests, travel histories, language abilities, and degrees of familiarity with local customs. These prior dispositions influence how they engage with heritage sites, museums, festivals, cuisine, religious practices, cultural performances, and local communities. Cultural tourism should therefore be understood as a social practice in which visitors actively interpret and co-create meaning rather than passively consume cultural attractions (Richards, 2021).

Visitors with extensive prior cultural knowledge may be able to recognize historical, artistic, or symbolic details that are less immediately accessible to others. However, cultural engagement should not be regarded as the exclusive domain of highly educated or culturally experienced tourists. Well-designed interpretation, storytelling, guided interaction, and participatory

activities can help visitors with different backgrounds develop cultural understanding and emotional connections. Research indicates that heritage interpretation can influence visitors' cultural identity, sense of responsibility, and willingness to support cultural transmission, particularly when interpretation combines knowledge with affective engagement (Ruan et al., 2024).

Embodied cultural capital is equally important among host communities. Local residents, artisans, performers, guides, chefs, healers, religious practitioners, farmers, and cultural interpreters may possess knowledge and competencies developed through prolonged participation in community life. Craftsmanship, culinary knowledge, oral history, storytelling, music, dance, ritual practices, traditional medicine, environmental knowledge, and hospitality skills are carried and reproduced through the bodies, memories, judgments, and practical actions of cultural practitioners.

Many of these competencies are tacit and cannot be fully documented through written descriptions or stored as physical objects. A craft practitioner, for example, may possess an intuitive understanding of materials, timing, movement, environmental conditions, and aesthetic judgment developed through years of practice. Similarly, performers and ritual specialists embody knowledge through voice, gesture, movement, memory, and interaction. Such knowledge remains culturally meaningful because it is continuously performed, interpreted, and adapted within social settings.

Intergenerational transmission is therefore central to the continuity of embodied cultural capital. Master–apprentice relationships, family learning, community participation, observation, and repeated practice enable younger generations to acquire both technical competence and the cultural meanings associated with particular traditions. Recent research on intangible cultural heritage practitioners demonstrates that tourism can influence this process by creating opportunities for practitioners, apprentices, institutions, visitors, and government agencies to participate in the continued transmission and adaptation of cultural knowledge (Wang et al., 2024).

Within creative and community-based tourism, embodied cultural capital can be activated through hands-on activities in which visitors learn directly from cultural practitioners. Craft workshops, cooking activities, agricultural practices, performances, storytelling sessions, and other participatory experiences allow practitioners to transform specialized knowledge into interactive tourism experiences. Evidence from the Ban Chiang World Heritage Site illustrates how traditional knowledge, local skills, community participation, and creative tourism activities can support heritage revitalization and sustainable community development (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

The tourism value of embodied cultural capital therefore lies not only in what individuals know but also in their capacity to perform, demonstrate, interpret, teach, and adapt that knowledge. Through interpersonal interaction, cultural knowledge becomes visible and experiential. Visitors do not

simply observe finished cultural products; they encounter the people, practices, skills, and meanings involved in their creation. Embodied cultural capital thus provides an important foundation for experiential tourism, cultural learning, and meaningful host–guest interaction.

Nevertheless, the conversion of embodied cultural capital into tourism value requires careful management. Tourism may privilege knowledge and performances that are easily presented or commercially attractive while overlooking less visible cultural meanings. Practitioners may also be treated merely as performers or service providers rather than as cultural authorities and knowledge holders. Sustainable development therefore requires appropriate recognition, fair compensation, community control over cultural representation, and investment in education and intergenerational transmission.

Embodied cultural capital should consequently be understood as a living and renewable resource, but not an unlimited one. It can be strengthened through learning, practice, participation, and transmission, yet it may diminish when practitioners lack successors, opportunities, institutional support, or authority over the use of their knowledge. In tourism development, safeguarding embodied cultural capital requires supporting the people who carry cultural knowledge, not merely preserving the objects, performances, or products presented to visitors.

2.2.2 Objectified Cultural Capital

Objectified cultural capital refers to cultural meanings, knowledge, and values embodied in material objects and physical forms. In Bourdieu's original formulation, this category included cultural goods such as books, paintings, instruments, artworks, and other objects that embody accumulated cultural knowledge and creative achievement (Bourdieu, 1986). Unlike embodied cultural capital, which is incorporated into the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individuals, objectified cultural capital exists in forms that may be possessed, displayed, preserved, exchanged, reproduced, and transmitted across generations.

The material ownership of a cultural object can generally be transferred. However, the cultural capacity required to understand, appreciate, or use that object cannot be transferred as easily. A person may purchase a painting, manuscript, musical instrument, or historical artifact without possessing the knowledge necessary to interpret its aesthetic, historical, or symbolic significance. Objectified cultural capital is therefore closely connected to embodied cultural capital. The cultural value accessible to an individual depends partly on the interpretive competencies, prior knowledge, and cultural dispositions brought to the encounter (Bourdieu, 1986).

This distinction also illustrates the difference between the economic ownership and cultural appropriation of an object. A cultural object may possess monetary value and be legally owned, while its deeper meanings remain accessible primarily to those with appropriate cultural knowledge. Conversely,

individuals who possess substantial cultural expertise may understand and interpret cultural objects without owning them. The value of objectified cultural capital therefore arises not only from physical possession but also from the relationships among objects, knowledge holders, institutions, and systems of cultural recognition.

In heritage and tourism studies, the concept has been extended beyond movable cultural goods to include monuments, historic buildings, archaeological sites, museums, archives, religious structures, historic districts, and cultural landscapes. These resources provide material evidence of past societies and embody historical, artistic, religious, political, and social meanings. Nevertheless, their significance is not contained entirely within their physical form. Cultural value is produced and continually reconstructed through conservation, research, interpretation, community memory, institutional recognition, and visitor engagement.

Objectified cultural capital plays an important role in preserving and communicating collective memory. Historic places and cultural objects connect contemporary communities with previous generations by providing visible reference points through which histories, identities, and experiences are recalled and interpreted. Recent research indicates that engagement with historic environments can reinforce place identity, belonging, intergenerational relationships, and the desire to preserve heritage for the future (Bowden et al., 2025). Material heritage therefore functions not simply as evidence of the past but as a

resource through which communities negotiate their relationships with history and place.

Museums represent a particularly important institutional setting for objectified cultural capital. They collect, classify, conserve, interpret, and display objects selected as culturally significant. Through exhibitions and educational activities, museums influence which histories are made visible, how cultural objects are understood, and whose knowledge is recognized. Museums should therefore not be viewed as neutral repositories. They participate actively in constructing cultural memory and assigning meaning and legitimacy to particular objects and narratives.

Digital technologies have further transformed the relationship between cultural objects, institutions, and audiences. Digitized collections, virtual exhibitions, augmented reality, and online museum platforms can expand access to objects that may be geographically distant, physically fragile, or unavailable for public display. Digitalization may also enhance museum learning and create more interconnected visitor experiences (Yap et al., 2024). However, digital representations do not necessarily replace the material object. Rather, they create additional channels through which objectified cultural capital can be interpreted, circulated, and experienced.

Within tourism, objectified cultural capital constitutes a major part of the tangible resource base through which destinations communicate their histories and identities. Heritage sites, museums, monuments, archaeological remains, sacred structures, traditional architecture, and cultural landscapes

provide settings for education, interpretation, reflection, and emotional engagement. Because these resources are embedded within particular historical and geographical contexts, they can contribute to destination distinctiveness and provide experiences that competing destinations cannot reproduce authentically.

The tourism value of material heritage does not arise automatically from the existence of cultural objects. Interpretation is required to connect physical evidence with the people, events, beliefs, practices, and meanings it represents. Without appropriate interpretation, visitors may encounter monuments or artifacts primarily as visually attractive objects without understanding their wider cultural significance. Research demonstrates that heritage interpretation can influence visitors' cultural identity, perceived responsibility, and willingness to support cultural transmission, particularly when interpretation creates both intellectual and emotional engagement (Ruan et al., 2024).

Objectified cultural capital is therefore activated through relationships with embodied cultural capital. Archaeologists, curators, historians, guides, religious practitioners, craftspeople, community elders, and local residents possess knowledge that enables material heritage to be understood. Their explanations, memories, performances, and narratives transform physical objects and places into meaningful visitor experiences. This relationship demonstrates that tangible and intangible dimensions of culture should not be managed separately: objects require people and practices to interpret them, while cultural knowledge

often depends on physical settings and artifacts for its expression and transmission.

Thailand possesses a substantial and diverse collection of objectified cultural capital. The Historic City of Ayutthaya preserves archaeological remains, monumental monasteries, reliquary towers, urban structures, and artistic evidence of a former Siamese capital that developed into an important centre of diplomacy and commerce. The Historic Town of Sukhothai and its associated towns similarly preserve monuments, sculptures, inscriptions, hydraulic systems, and urban landscapes associated with the early development of Siamese architecture, art, language, religion, and governance (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026-a, 2026-b).

Beyond these World Heritage properties, Buddhist temples, royal palaces, traditional houses, museum collections, religious objects, manuscripts, artworks, and archaeological artifacts embody multiple periods and dimensions of Thai cultural development. These resources function simultaneously as tourism attractions, educational resources, sacred places, expressions of local identity, and symbols of national heritage. Their value therefore extends beyond their capacity to generate visitor demand or tourism revenue.

The conversion of objectified cultural capital into tourism value nevertheless creates important management challenges. Physical deterioration, inappropriate restoration, excessive visitation, commercial development, removal from original contexts, and simplified interpretation may weaken the cultural meanings and integrity of heritage resources. Decisions

regarding which objects are displayed, which histories are emphasized, and how sites are represented may also privilege certain groups and narratives while marginalizing others.

Sustainable tourism management must therefore treat objectified cultural capital as more than a collection of marketable attractions. Conservation should be accompanied by inclusive interpretation, community participation, appropriate visitor management, and continued investment in the people and institutions responsible for maintaining cultural meaning. Objectified cultural capital remains valuable not merely because cultural objects survive physically, but because communities retain the knowledge, authority, and opportunities necessary to interpret, use, and transmit them.

2.2.3 Institutionalized Cultural Capital

Institutionalized cultural capital refers to cultural knowledge and competencies that receive formal recognition through qualifications, credentials, and other institutionally authorized forms of certification. In Bourdieu's original formulation, its clearest expression is the academic qualification, which provides embodied cultural competence with a conventional, legally recognized, and comparatively durable form of value. Unlike embodied cultural capital, which may be difficult for others to observe or evaluate consistently, an officially recognized credential enables knowledge and competence to be compared, communicated, and exchanged more readily within educational, professional, and employment systems (Bourdieu, 1986).

Institutional recognition therefore transforms cultural competence into a socially legitimate and exchangeable resource. Academic degrees, professional qualifications, occupational licences, and specialist certifications indicate that an individual has satisfied standards established by an authorized institution. Such credentials can facilitate access to employment, professional status, authority, social recognition, and economic opportunities. They reduce the need for individuals to demonstrate their competence repeatedly because the certifying institution provides an accepted guarantee of its value.

Institutionalized cultural capital should not, however, be regarded as a completely neutral or objective representation of competence. Institutions determine which forms of knowledge are recognized, how competencies are assessed, and whose expertise is formally legitimized. Traditional knowledge holders, artisans, performers, healers, religious practitioners, community historians, and other cultural specialists may possess extensive embodied cultural capital without holding qualifications recognized by formal educational or professional systems. Institutionalization can therefore enhance visibility and credibility, but it may also privilege standardized and formally documented knowledge over locally embedded, experiential, or informally transmitted expertise.

When cultural capital theory is extended from individuals to communities, organizations, products, and destinations, the concept of institutionalization requires careful adaptation. UNESCO inscriptions, national heritage registrations, geographical indication certifications, museum accreditation,

professional licences, and tourism quality standards do not correspond precisely to Bourdieu's original category of academic credentials. Nevertheless, they may be understood as mechanisms of institutional validation through which authorized organizations recognize particular places, products, practices, or cultural resources as possessing significance, authenticity, quality, or legitimacy.

At the collective level, institutional recognition can transform locally valued cultural resources into assets with wider symbolic reach. A cultural practice, historic place, craft tradition, or locally produced good may already possess substantial cultural meaning before receiving external recognition. Formal designation does not create cultural value from nothing. Rather, it translates selected dimensions of that value into classifications and standards that can be recognized by governments, professional organizations, markets, and international institutions. Institutionalization can consequently enhance visibility, prestige, credibility, access to financial or technical support, and opportunities for cultural transmission.

Within tourism, institutional validation provides signals that help visitors interpret unfamiliar destinations and cultural resources. World Heritage inscriptions, intangible cultural heritage listings, geographical indications, accredited museums, licensed guides, and professional certifications may communicate that a site, practice, product, or service has been assessed according to established criteria. Such recognition can influence visitor expectations, perceived authenticity, trust,

destination image, and decisions concerning which places, products, or experiences to select.

The UNESCO World Heritage system represents one of the most visible forms of institutional recognition applied to places. Properties included on the World Heritage List must demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value and satisfy at least one of the criteria established under the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026). Inscription places a property within an internationally recognized framework concerned with its identification, protection, conservation, presentation, and transmission to future generations. World Heritage status therefore confers substantial symbolic capital while simultaneously creating continuing responsibilities related to management, monitoring, conservation, reporting, and visitor use.

World Heritage recognition should not, however, be interpreted merely as a tourism award or promotional label. Although inscription may enhance international awareness, attract investment, and increase destination visibility, its principal purpose is to safeguard heritage considered significant to humanity. Greater recognition may also create new management pressures through increased visitation, commercial development, competing interpretations, and heightened stakeholder expectations. The value generated by institutional recognition consequently depends on whether tourism development remains compatible with conservation requirements, community interests, and the cultural significance for which the property was recognized.

Institutional recognition of intangible cultural heritage operates somewhat differently because living heritage resides primarily in the knowledge, skills, practices, meanings, and social relationships maintained by communities, groups, and individuals. Formal listing should therefore support safeguarding, awareness, respect, and intergenerational transmission rather than convert a cultural practice into the property of an institution. Recognition is most sustainable when the communities and practitioners concerned continue to exercise meaningful authority over how their traditions are represented, performed, adapted, taught, and communicated to visitors.

Geographical indications provide another important form of place-based institutional recognition. A geographical indication identifies a product whose quality, reputation, or other characteristics are closely associated with a particular geographical origin. In Thailand, registered GI products must comply with defined production requirements and quality-control arrangements before authorized producers may use the official GI symbol (Department of Intellectual Property, 2026). GI systems therefore formalize relationships among place, local knowledge, production techniques, environmental conditions, cultural identity, and product reputation.

Within tourism, GI recognition can connect local products with gastronomy, crafts, agricultural landscapes, community enterprises, and place-based storytelling. Visitors may be encouraged not only to purchase certified products but also to learn about their origins, production processes, environmental contexts, and associated community knowledge.

Such recognition can strengthen destination distinctiveness and create opportunities for local value creation. Nevertheless, certification alone does not guarantee that economic benefits will reach local producers or that traditional knowledge will remain viable. Effective governance, producer participation, quality control, fair benefit distribution, and continuing knowledge transmission remain essential.

Thailand illustrates the operation of institutional recognition across several forms of cultural capital. The Ban Chiang Archaeological Site was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1992 in recognition of its importance to understanding prehistoric cultural, agricultural, social, and technological development in Southeast Asia **(Figure 16)**. More recently, the Ancient Town of Si Thep and its Associated Dvaravati Monuments was inscribed in 2023, followed by Phu Phrabat, a testimony to the Sīma stone tradition of the Dvaravati period, in 2024 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026). These inscriptions position Thailand's archaeological sites and cultural landscapes within internationally recognized frameworks of heritage significance, conservation, and cultural interpretation **(Figure 17)**.

Thailand's institutionalized cultural resources also include national heritage inventories, UNESCO-recognized elements of living heritage, registered geographical indications, professional guide licences, museum systems, educational qualifications, and certifications associated with traditional cultural and wellness practices. Together, these mechanisms influence which cultural resources receive formal recognition,

how their significance is communicated, and how they are connected to tourism development, education, cultural policy, professional practice, and national identity.

Institutional recognition can also enhance the symbolic value of cultural resources by associating them with institutional authority and internationally accepted standards. A heritage designation, certification, or professional qualification may increase public confidence and provide cultural resources with greater visibility within tourism markets. However, institutional recognition also involves processes of selection and exclusion. Institutions exercise power by determining which competencies, places, products, histories, and cultural expressions are officially valued, while other forms of knowledge may receive limited recognition or remain absent from formal systems.

Institutionalized cultural capital should therefore be understood not simply as the possession of an official title, certificate, or designation but as a relationship among cultural knowledge, institutional authority, legitimacy, and systems of recognition. A critical application of cultural capital theory must examine who establishes the standards, who participates in the recognition process, whose knowledge is legitimized, and how the resulting benefits, opportunities, and responsibilities are distributed.

For sustainable tourism development, institutional recognition should support rather than replace living cultural meanings and community-based systems of knowledge. Heritage listings, certifications, accreditations, and professional qualifications are most valuable when they strengthen conservation, community agency, practitioner recognition, intergenerational transmission, and responsible visitor engagement. Institutionalized cultural capital thus provides a bridge between locally embedded cultural resources and wider systems of legitimacy. Its long-term contribution, however, depends on inclusive governance and continued support for the individuals and communities that create, maintain, interpret, and transmit those resources.

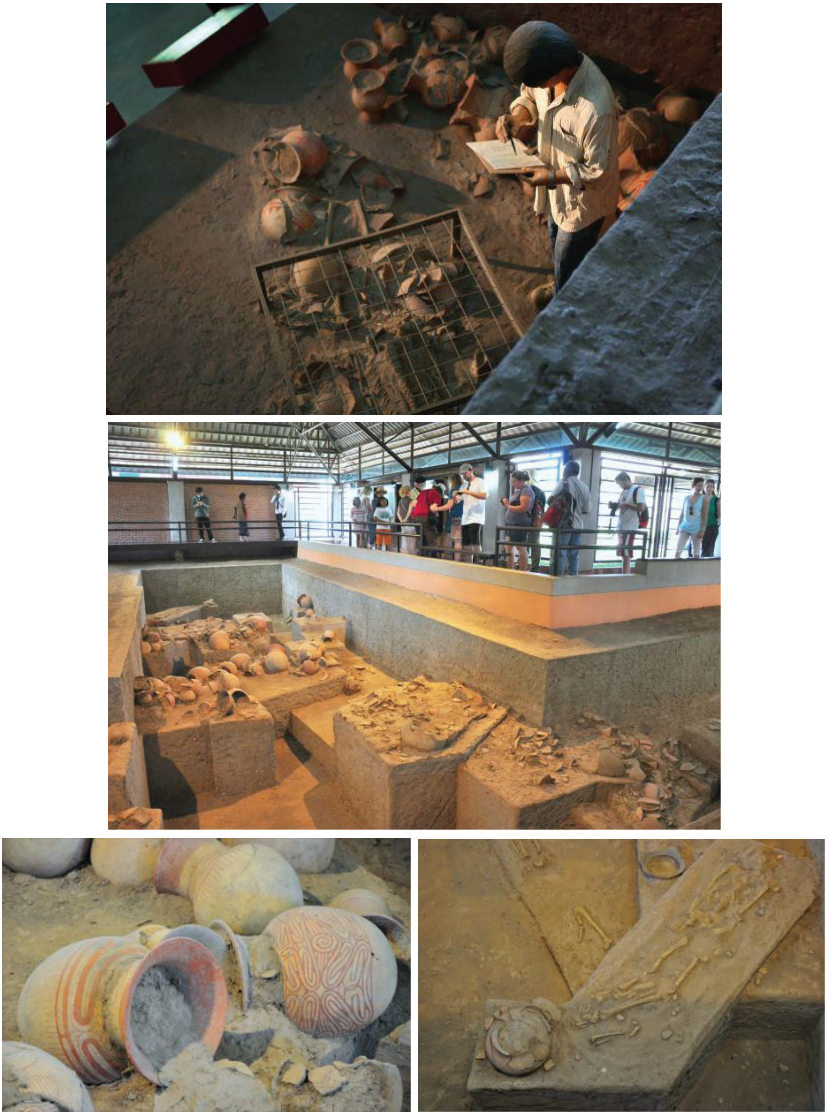


Figure 16. Ban Chiang Archaeological Site
Source: guide2thailand.com and Hoffman via Flickr



Figure 17. The Ancient Town of Si Thep
Source: tatnews.org

The significance of institutionalized cultural capital extends beyond tourism promotion. Institutional recognition can contribute to heritage safeguarding, education, professional development, public awareness, and intergenerational transmission by establishing frameworks through which cultural knowledge, practices, places, and products are identified, evaluated, documented, and supported. Recognition may also provide cultural practitioners, heritage institutions, and communities with greater visibility, legitimacy, access to resources, and opportunities to communicate cultural meanings to wider audiences.

However, institutional recognition is not a neutral process. Governments, international organizations, professional experts, and cultural institutions exercise authority by establishing the criteria used to determine which cultural expressions are considered significant, authentic, or worthy of protection. Formal designations may therefore elevate selected sites, practices, and narratives while other forms of heritage remain overlooked or receive less institutional support. Recent scholarship demonstrates that international heritage recognition can generate cultural prestige and symbolic value, while also reflecting negotiations among institutional authority, expert judgment, national interests, and competing interpretations of heritage (Kalaycioglu, 2025).

These concerns are particularly important in relation to living heritage, whose meanings and continuity depend upon the communities, groups, and practitioners who create, maintain, and transmit it. Community participation is therefore essential in

determining what constitutes cultural heritage and how it should be represented, safeguarded, and adapted over time (UNESCO, 2026; Woodhead, 2023). Institutionalized cultural capital should consequently be understood not only as a mechanism that certifies cultural value but also as a social and political process through which cultural meanings, legitimacy, representation, and authority are continuously negotiated.

2.2.4 Capital Conversion and Tourism Development

One of the most significant contributions of Bourdieu's theoretical framework is the proposition that different forms of capital are neither fixed nor entirely independent. Under particular social, cultural, economic, and institutional conditions, one form of capital may be converted into another (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural knowledge may support employment and entrepreneurship, social relationships may provide access to markets and resources, and institutional recognition may transform cultural competence into professional authority or prestige. Cultural capital therefore possesses value not only as a cultural resource in its own right but also through its capacity to generate economic, social, and symbolic forms of value.

Capital conversion should not, however, be understood as an automatic or universally beneficial process. The value of cultural capital depends on the field in which it is mobilized, the actors who possess the authority to interpret it, and the institutions and markets that recognize it. Conversion normally requires investment, organization, communication, and access to supportive networks. It may also involve costs, unequal power

relationships, and competition over who controls cultural resources and receives the benefits generated from them.

Within tourism, capital conversion provides a useful framework for explaining how cultural resources are transformed into visitor experiences, community benefits, destination reputation, and economic opportunities. Heritage, gastronomy, performing arts, traditional craftsmanship, festivals, local knowledge, and everyday cultural practices do not automatically acquire tourism value simply because they exist. They must be interpreted, organized, presented, and connected to tourism markets through the activities of cultural practitioners, communities, entrepreneurs, public agencies, and destination organizations.

From an economic perspective, cultural capital may be converted into economic capital through tourism consumption, creative production, entrepreneurship, employment, and the development of cultural and creative industries. Traditional knowledge and cultural expressions can contribute to tourism enterprises, cultural products, workshops, performances, guided experiences, festivals, museums, and creative services. Cultural and creative sectors consequently generate employment and income while also supporting innovation, entrepreneurship, and local economic development (OECD, 2022).

The conversion of cultural capital into economic value does not necessarily require the creation of entirely new cultural resources. Communities may generate new opportunities by interpreting, redesigning, or combining existing knowledge, skills, traditions, and cultural environments. Traditional craft

techniques, for example, may be incorporated into contemporary products, visitor workshops, exhibitions, cultural routes, or digital storytelling. Creative tourism can thereby transform cultural knowledge into participatory experiences while supporting cultural preservation, local enterprises, and economic empowerment.

Cultural capital may also be converted into social capital. Cultural festivals, heritage initiatives, community museums, craft groups, and community-based tourism activities frequently require residents, cultural practitioners, businesses, and public institutions to cooperate. These relationships may strengthen networks, trust, knowledge exchange, collective identity, and the community's capacity to undertake joint activities. Research on creative tourism in Thailand demonstrates that the mobilization of cultural resources can reinforce social networks and stakeholder collaboration while contributing to cultural preservation, local well-being, and sustainable socioeconomic development (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

This conversion is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Cultural capital can strengthen social relationships, but social capital is also required to preserve, activate, and transmit cultural resources. Communities with strong networks may be better positioned to organize cultural activities, share knowledge, negotiate with external organizations, and distribute responsibilities. Conversely, weak participation, internal conflict, or unequal control may prevent cultural resources from generating broadly shared benefits.

A further dimension of capital conversion concerns symbolic capital. Cultural resources may generate recognition, legitimacy, prestige, distinction, and reputation when their value is acknowledged by visitors, institutions, markets, or wider society. Heritage designations, cultural awards, geographical indications, media representation, museum exhibitions, and destination narratives can increase the visibility and perceived significance of cultural resources. In tourism, such symbolic value may strengthen destination identity, improve market positioning, and distinguish a place from competitors offering similar infrastructure or services.

Symbolic capital is particularly influential because tourism decisions are shaped not only by the physical characteristics of destinations but also by the meanings and reputations associated with them. Cultural and creative tourism can contribute to destination branding by connecting places with distinctive histories, identities, creative practices, and emotional associations (Kasemsarn et al., 2025). Once established, symbolic capital may subsequently be converted into economic advantages through increased visitor interest, stronger product recognition, investment opportunities, and market differentiation.

Nevertheless, symbolic capital does not exist independently of social recognition. A cultural object, tradition, or destination acquires prestige when relevant audiences and institutions recognize it as authentic, significant, or desirable. Tourism media, exhibitions, cultural institutions, social media creators, guides, visitors, and local communities all participate in producing and negotiating these meanings. Symbolic value may

therefore change over time as cultural narratives are reinterpreted or as different actors acquire greater authority over representation.

Textile and handicraft communities in Southern Isan illustrate the conversion of cultural capital into multiple forms of value. In Khwao Sinarin District, Surin Province, silk-weaving knowledge, production techniques, patterns, and craft skills have been transmitted across generations and remain closely connected to community culture and identity. Research indicates that local mudmee silk patterns reflect heritage, lifestyles, traditions, religious beliefs, histories, and relationships with the surrounding environment (Chaijan, 2024).

When these weaving traditions are incorporated into cultural tourism, community exhibitions, workshops, creative performances, product development, and destination narratives, embodied knowledge and material cultural products can be transformed into wider economic, social, and symbolic value. The resulting benefits may include income generation, cultural education, stronger community relationships, innovation, and increased recognition of local craftsmanship (Suktong, 2024). The value of the textiles therefore lies not only in their market price but also in their capacity to communicate local identity, cultural memory, authenticity, creativity, and prestige **(Figure 18).**

This example also demonstrates that capital conversion involves interaction among different forms of cultural capital. The embodied knowledge of weavers is expressed through objectified cultural capital in the form of textiles, patterns, tools,

and products. Exhibitions, certifications, cultural institutions, media narratives, and tourism programs may provide institutional recognition, while visitor appreciation and wider public recognition contribute to symbolic capital. Tourism enterprises and product sales may subsequently generate economic capital, while collaboration among weavers, communities, institutions, and tourism organizations can strengthen social capital.

The conversion process must nevertheless be managed carefully. Increased market exposure may encourage innovation and provide new livelihoods, but it may also lead to standardized designs, imitation, cultural appropriation, or the prioritization of commercially attractive products over culturally significant practices. When external organizations dominate representation or market access, cultural practitioners may lose control over how their knowledge is used and how benefits are distributed.

Capital conversion in tourism should therefore be evaluated not only in terms of the financial value produced but also according to its effects on cultural continuity, practitioner authority, social relationships, and community well-being. Sustainable conversion requires fair compensation, community participation, cultural integrity, supportive institutions, and continued investment in knowledge transmission. Tourism development becomes most beneficial when the transformation of cultural capital generates economic opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing the cultural, social, and symbolic resources upon which those opportunities depend.



Figure 18. Thailand Southern Isan textile Community
Source: travel.mthai.com

Contemporary tourism development highlights experiential value as an increasingly important outcome of capital conversion. Experiential value should not be treated as a separate form of capital within Bourdieu's original framework. Rather, it emerges when cultural knowledge, objects, practices, and meanings are interpreted and mobilized through tourism to create value for visitors, communities, and destinations. Although the experience-economy framework established the foundational distinction between delivering services and staging memorable experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), more recent tourism research has extended this discussion toward immersive, co-created, and potentially transformative experiences that

generate meaning, learning, emotional engagement, and personal development (Amaro et al., 2025).

Cultural resources contribute to experiential value when visitors are provided with opportunities to engage actively with their meanings rather than merely observe them. Heritage interpretation, storytelling, cultural demonstrations, creative workshops, local cuisine, performances, and interactions with cultural practitioners can transform historical knowledge and cultural practices into lived experiences. Experiential learning in cultural tourism is particularly strengthened through immersive engagement, critical reflection, access to meaningful information, and interaction with places and people (Wang & Dolah, 2024). Cultural authenticity can further enhance educational, aesthetic, entertainment, and escapist dimensions of heritage experiences while contributing to emotional resonance, visitor satisfaction, and stronger identification with the destination (Zhu et al., 2025).

The conversion of cultural capital into multiple forms of value can be observed clearly in cultural festivals and community events. A festival may generate economic value through visitor expenditure, employment, local enterprise, and product sales. It may simultaneously strengthen social capital by encouraging cooperation among residents, cultural practitioners, businesses, and public organizations. Cultural performances, media attention, institutional recognition, and visitor narratives may contribute to symbolic capital by enhancing the visibility, prestige, and distinctiveness of the host community. At the same

time, participation, interaction, celebration, and cultural learning create experiential value for visitors and residents.

These forms of value are interconnected rather than independent. Authentic cultural events can reinforce community identity, social well-being, and destination sustainability when they are supported by inclusive stakeholder relationships and culturally appropriate management (Le et al., 2024). Residents' perceptions of the social benefits generated by tourism events may also influence quality of life, place attachment, prosocial behaviour, and support for tourism development (Agyeiwaah & Zhao, 2024). Economic, social, symbolic, and experiential outcomes may therefore reinforce one another when tourism development strengthens both visitor experiences and community well-being.

Nevertheless, the conversion of cultural capital into tourism value also presents significant risks. Efforts to make cultural resources accessible and commercially attractive may encourage commodification, excessive staging, standardization, or the simplification of complex cultural meanings. Cultural practices may be separated from their original social, spiritual, or historical contexts and redesigned primarily around visitor expectations. When economic and promotional objectives dominate decision-making, cultural practitioners may lose control over representation, locally significant practices may receive less attention, and tourism benefits may be distributed unevenly.

The production of memorable or transformative visitor experiences should therefore not be achieved at the expense of

cultural integrity or community authority. Cultural sustainability requires attention to factors operating across multiple levels, including the attitudes and behaviours of visitors, the practices of tourism organizations, relationships within host communities, and wider institutional and policy environments (Zhang et al., 2025). Sustainable capital conversion consequently requires community participation, fair compensation, appropriate interpretation, respect for cultural boundaries, and continued investment in the transmission and renewal of cultural knowledge.

Understanding tourism through the lens of capital conversion broadens conventional perspectives on tourism development. Rather than viewing culture simply as a collection of attractions, this perspective explains how cultural resources are mobilized, interpreted, recognized, and transformed into interconnected forms of economic, social, symbolic, and experiential value. Tourism becomes not merely a mechanism for generating visitor expenditure but a field in which cultural meanings, community relationships, destination identities, and visitor experiences are continuously produced and negotiated.

The success of capital conversion should therefore be evaluated through more than financial returns or visitor numbers. It should also be assessed according to the quality of visitor learning and engagement, the continuity of cultural practices, the authority and well-being of cultural practitioners, the strength of community relationships, and the capacity of destinations to protect and renew their cultural resources. When these dimensions are appropriately balanced, tourism can generate

meaningful experiences while simultaneously contributing to cultural continuity, social inclusion, destination resilience, and long-term vitality.

2.2.5 Critiques and Contemporary Relevance

Despite its enduring influence across the social sciences, Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital has generated considerable debate, criticism, and reinterpretation. These discussions do not necessarily indicate that the theory has become obsolete. Rather, they reflect continuing efforts to determine how its central concepts should be applied within social, cultural, technological, and economic conditions that differ substantially from those in which the theory was originally developed.

One of the most common criticisms concerns Bourdieu's emphasis on social reproduction and structural inequality. Some critics argue that the framework presents individuals as strongly constrained by inherited social positions, established institutions, and historically formed dispositions. From this perspective, the theory may appear to underestimate agency, creativity, resistance, innovation, and the possibility of social transformation.

This criticism, however, requires qualification. Bourdieu did not describe habitus as a rigid system that mechanically determines behaviour. Individuals are capable of improvisation and adaptation, while fields and the forms of capital valued within them may change over time. Nevertheless, the range of opportunities individuals perceive and their capacity to respond to change remain influenced by previous socialization, available resources, and their positions within particular fields. The theory

therefore directs attention to socially structured possibilities rather than denying agency altogether (Bourdieu, 1990).

A second critique concerns the historical and geographical context of Bourdieu's work. His analysis emerged primarily from twentieth-century French society, where participation in literature, classical music, museums, visual art, and other institutionally valued forms of culture played an important role in class distinction. Applying these indicators universally risks overlooking the different cultural hierarchies, knowledge systems, and forms of recognition operating in other societies.

This issue is particularly important in culturally diverse and postcolonial contexts. Traditional ecological knowledge, oral histories, indigenous languages, religious practices, craft skills, popular culture, and community-based knowledge may possess considerable cultural value without receiving the same recognition as institutionally legitimized cultural forms. Contemporary applications must therefore avoid treating Western definitions of high culture as universal standards of cultural competence.

Cultural participation has also become increasingly diverse, fluid, and interconnected. Globalization, migration, cultural hybridity, and transnational communication have enabled individuals to engage with cultural expressions from multiple places and traditions. Cultural competence may now involve an ability to navigate difference, communicate across cultural boundaries, demonstrate openness, and combine cultural resources drawn from local, national, and global environments.

Recent scholarship consequently suggests that cultural capital has not disappeared but that the forms through which it is expressed and recognized are changing. Among younger generations, classical cultural participation may have become less dominant as an exclusive marker of distinction, while engagement with popular culture, digital media, ethical and political issues, and culturally diverse content has become increasingly significant. Digital distinctions and the ability to interpret, curate, and communicate cultural content may themselves function as emerging forms of cultural advantage (Prieur et al., 2023).

Digital technologies have further expanded the spaces in which cultural capital can be acquired, displayed, and converted into recognition. Social media platforms, online learning environments, streaming services, virtual museums, gaming communities, and creator networks provide new opportunities for cultural participation and creative expression. Individuals can develop cultural knowledge, construct identities, form networks, and communicate expertise without relying exclusively on conventional cultural institutions.

However, digital access does not necessarily eliminate cultural inequality. The ability to identify reliable information, use digital tools creatively, understand platform conventions, communicate effectively, and gain visibility remains unevenly distributed. Platform algorithms and network structures may also privilege particular forms of content and particular groups of creators. Digital cultural capital can therefore expand participation while simultaneously producing new distinctions

based on technological access, literacy, language, visibility, and social networks.

Moreover, evidence indicates that traditional cultural distinctions have not disappeared entirely. Recent research continues to identify relationships among cultural participation, social position, and access to prestigious social networks. Participation in institutionally valued cultural activities may still provide greater access to high-status contacts and social resources than participation in popular culture alone (Cebula, 2024). Contemporary cultural capital is therefore best understood as changing and diversifying rather than simply replacing older forms of distinction.

A further criticism concerns conceptual expansion. Cultural capital was originally developed to explain how individuals and social groups acquire advantages from culturally valued knowledge, dispositions, objects, and credentials. Contemporary studies frequently extend the concept to organizations, communities, cities, regions, and nations. This extension can be productive, but it also risks transforming cultural capital into a general term for any culturally related resource.

At the collective level, communities should not be treated as possessing a single, uniform body of cultural capital. Community members may differ in their access to cultural knowledge, authority, institutional recognition, and economic opportunities. Certain groups may control cultural representation, while others may be excluded from decisions regarding which traditions are preserved, promoted, or incorporated into tourism.

Applications at the community or destination level must therefore retain Bourdieu's concern with power, recognition, inequality, and benefit distribution.

Another area of debate concerns the relationship between cultural capital and value creation. Bourdieu focused principally on how culturally valued resources contribute to distinction, privilege, and social reproduction. Cultural economics, policy studies, and development research have broadened this perspective by examining how cultural resources contribute to creativity, innovation, employment, well-being, social inclusion, and local development.

This broader interpretation adds an important dimension to cultural capital but should not replace its critical foundations. Cultural resources may generate economic and social value, yet the processes through which this value is created are rarely neutral. Questions remain regarding whose culture receives investment, which cultural expressions are selected for promotion, who controls their representation, and how benefits are distributed. A cultural resource may support development while simultaneously reinforcing unequal relationships or marginalizing less commercially visible forms of cultural expression.

International policy discussions increasingly recognize culture as central to inclusive and sustainable development. UNESCO's contemporary policy framework positions culture not only as an instrument for economic development but also as a public good and a development objective in its own right. It emphasizes cultural rights, diversity, education, digital

transformation, resilience, and equitable participation, while acknowledging persistent inequalities in access, funding, and cultural representation (UNESCO, 2025). Similarly, the OECD highlights the contributions of cultural and creative sectors to employment, entrepreneurship, social cohesion, well-being, cultural participation, and place-based development (OECD, 2023).

Within tourism, cultural capital theory remains valuable because it explains how cultural knowledge, practices, objects, institutions, and systems of recognition influence destination identity and visitor experiences. Cultural resources are not equally visible or equally valued within tourism markets. Their transformation into attractions, products, and experiences depends on interpretation, institutional support, market recognition, community participation, and relationships of power.

The theory is particularly relevant to the growth of participatory, creative, and experience-based tourism. Visitors increasingly engage with destinations through cultural learning, storytelling, workshops, gastronomy, festivals, digital media, and interactions with cultural practitioners. These activities enable cultural resources to generate experiential, symbolic, social, and economic value. Cultural capital therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how destinations create distinctiveness and meaningful visitor engagement (Richards, 2021).

Nevertheless, a Bourdieusian perspective also encourages critical questions about tourism development. It asks who

defines cultural authenticity, who has the authority to interpret local heritage, which cultural practices are made visible, and who benefits when cultural knowledge is transformed into tourism value. It also draws attention to the possibility that commercially attractive narratives may receive greater recognition than culturally significant practices that are more difficult to present or sell.

Contemporary applications should therefore combine cultural capital theory with concepts such as community agency, cultural rights, co-creation, inclusive governance, and cultural sustainability. Evidence from creative tourism in Thailand demonstrates that cultural resources can support local identity, cultural transmission, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable development when they interact with social networks, community participation, supportive institutions, and other forms of community capital (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

The enduring contribution of cultural capital theory lies in both its adaptability and its critical power. Its concepts must be revised carefully to account for digital participation, cultural hybridity, changing systems of distinction, and collective forms of cultural value. At the same time, its central insight remains highly relevant: cultural resources are not distributed, recognized, or converted into advantages equally.

Cultural capital theory therefore offers more than an explanation of how culture contributes to creativity, tourism, or economic development. It provides a framework for examining the power relationships through which cultural value is defined, legitimized, and distributed. Used critically, the theory can help

explain how culture supports innovation, identity, visitor experience, and sustainable development while also revealing inequalities in access, representation, authority, and benefit distribution. Its contemporary relevance lies precisely in this capacity to connect the productive potential of culture with critical questions of power and social justice.

2.3 Cultural Economics

Cultural economics is a specialized field concerned with the production, distribution, consumption, financing, and valuation of cultural goods, services, institutions, and activities. It examines areas such as the arts, heritage, museums, festivals, cultural participation, creative industries, and cultural labour. Although cultural economics employs conventional economic concepts, it also recognizes that cultural resources possess characteristics that distinguish them from many ordinary market goods. Their significance frequently extends beyond direct financial transactions to include historical, symbolic, aesthetic, educational, spiritual, and social value (Towse, 2019).

Cultural goods and services may generate economic value through admission fees, product sales, employment, tourism expenditure, intellectual property, and commercial investment. However, market prices capture only part of their overall contribution. A historic building may attract visitors and support local businesses while also preserving collective memory and strengthening place identity. A museum may generate income while providing education, public access to knowledge, and opportunities for cultural participation.

Similarly, a festival may stimulate visitor spending while reinforcing cultural continuity, community relationships, and a shared sense of belonging.

Cultural economics therefore distinguishes between economic value and cultural value. Economic value concerns the benefits that individuals and societies derive from allocating scarce resources and may include both market and non-market benefits. Cultural value refers to the meanings and qualities associated with cultural expressions, including their historical significance, aesthetic qualities, symbolic importance, authenticity, spiritual meaning, and contribution to identity. These dimensions may interact, but they cannot always be reduced to a single monetary measure.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that cultural value is produced through processes of interpretation and collective meaning-making. The value of a cultural object, performance, or place is not determined solely by its physical characteristics or market demand. It is also shaped by relationships among cultural practitioners, communities, audiences, institutions, and wider social contexts. Cultural value may consequently differ among groups and change over time as cultural meanings are interpreted, contested, and renewed (Kaszynska, 2024).

This multidimensional understanding challenges the assumption that the contribution of culture can be assessed adequately through revenue, employment, or visitor numbers alone. Cultural participation may generate learning, emotional engagement, personal development, aesthetic appreciation, social connection, and a sense of identity. These outcomes may

be highly significant to individuals and communities even when they do not result in measurable financial returns.

A related concern within cultural economics is the existence of non-market benefits and externalities. Cultural activities often generate effects that extend beyond the individuals who directly produce, purchase, or experience them. The conservation of a heritage site, for example, may benefit people who never visit it because they value its continued existence or wish to preserve it for future generations. Cultural institutions may contribute to education, civic identity, community attractiveness, and cultural knowledge beyond the immediate experiences of their visitors.

Bille (2024) describes these wider effects as cultural capital externalities. Participation in cultural activities can develop knowledge, competencies, appreciation, and cultural engagement among individuals, which may subsequently produce broader benefits for society. These benefits can include learning, creativity, well-being, social cohesion, and increased capacity for cultural participation. Cultural economics therefore examines both the private returns received by participants and the wider social returns that may justify collective investment in culture.

The existence of externalities also provides an important rationale for public intervention. If cultural resources produce benefits that are not fully reflected in market prices, relying exclusively on commercial demand may result in insufficient conservation, production, or access. Public funding, cultural policy, education, regulation, and institutional support may

therefore be necessary to preserve heritage, support cultural practitioners, encourage participation, and ensure that cultural opportunities remain accessible to diverse groups.

Public support does not, however, eliminate the need for critical evaluation. Cultural policy involves decisions concerning which institutions, practices, and cultural expressions receive recognition and resources. Policymakers must therefore consider not only economic impact but also cultural diversity, public access, community participation, artistic freedom, geographical inequality, and the long-term sustainability of cultural resources.

The expansion of the creative economy has further increased the relevance of cultural economics. Film, music, publishing, design, architecture, fashion, crafts, digital media, gaming, advertising, and the performing arts generate value through creativity, knowledge, cultural expression, intellectual property, and technological innovation. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development reports that the creative economy makes measurable contributions to national output, employment, and international trade, although its scale varies considerably across countries (UNCTAD, 2024).

Creative industries also demonstrate that cultural and economic value are closely connected but not identical. A film, performance, fashion product, or digital work may possess commercial value while communicating identity, history, social values, or cultural narratives. Conversely, cultural activities with limited market profitability may still possess considerable educational, symbolic, or community significance. Cultural economics therefore examines how cultural production can

remain economically viable without reducing cultural value exclusively to consumer demand.

Digitalization is transforming the ways creative goods are produced, distributed, and consumed. Streaming platforms, social media, artificial intelligence, virtual environments, and digital marketplaces can reduce distribution costs and provide creators with access to wider audiences. At the same time, these technologies generate challenges related to copyright, unequal platform power, market concentration, cultural diversity, data governance, and the distribution of income among creators and intermediaries (UNCTAD, 2024).

Cultural and creative sectors can also contribute to local and regional development. Cultural institutions, creative enterprises, heritage environments, and cultural events may create employment, encourage entrepreneurship, support innovation, and enhance the attractiveness of places in which to live, work, visit, and invest. Their contributions may extend to social inclusion, community well-being, place identity, and local social capital, demonstrating why culture should be treated as a strategic investment rather than a peripheral public service (OECD, 2022).

The relationship between cultural economics and tourism is particularly significant. Tourism creates markets through which heritage, cultural performances, crafts, cuisine, festivals, creative products, and cultural knowledge can generate income and employment. Tourism can also increase the visibility of cultural resources and provide incentives for conservation, cultural transmission, and creative adaptation. Nevertheless, the

economic use of culture may introduce risks when commercial objectives become disconnected from cultural meanings and community interests.

Cultural tourism development must therefore consider more than the number of visitors or the revenue generated. Economic assessments should be accompanied by attention to cultural integrity, practitioner well-being, local participation, access, benefit distribution, and the continuing ability of communities to maintain and transmit cultural knowledge. A tourism activity may produce substantial income while simultaneously weakening cultural meaning, excluding local practitioners, or creating pressure on heritage resources. Economic success alone is therefore an insufficient measure of sustainable cultural development.

Thailand's *Khon* masked dance drama illustrates the multiple forms of value considered within cultural economics. Khon combines dance, music, vocal performance, literature, ritual, costume, mask-making, and other forms of craftsmanship. Its significance therefore lies not only in the performance itself but also in the knowledge, skills, artistic traditions, and networks of practitioners required for its continued production and transmission (UNESCO, 2026).

Khon **(Figure 19)** was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2018. This recognition increased its institutional visibility but did not create its cultural value, which had already been maintained through generations of performers, musicians, narrators, teachers, craftspeople, and supporting institutions.

UNESCO recognition should consequently be understood as a mechanism that supports awareness and safeguarding rather than as a commercial certification.

The presentation of *Khon* within contemporary tourism demonstrates how traditional cultural resources may be adapted to reach wider audiences. Performances at the Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theatre retain traditional movement, music, narration, ritual elements, costumes, and artistic standards while incorporating modern staging, visual techniques, and multilingual subtitles. Such adaptation can improve accessibility for international visitors without necessarily abandoning the cultural foundations of the performance.

From a cultural economics perspective, *Khon* can generate interconnected forms of value. Performances may create employment and tourism expenditure, while costume production, mask-making, music, training, and stage production support wider creative networks. Khon also generates symbolic value by communicating Thai cultural identity and artistic achievement, educational value by introducing audiences to the *Ramakien* and Thai performing arts, and transmission value by creating opportunities for practitioners and younger generations to develop specialized knowledge.

However, the economic and tourism potential of *Khon* should not overshadow its cultural and social significance. Sustainable development requires continued support for performers, teachers, musicians, craftspeople, and institutions responsible for safeguarding the art form. It also requires careful interpretation so that *Khon* is not reduced to an abbreviated

visual spectacle separated from its literary, ritual, artistic, and historical meanings.

Cultural economics thus provides a framework for understanding both the productive potential and the distinctive characteristics of cultural resources. It demonstrates that culture contributes to employment, trade, innovation, tourism, and regional development while simultaneously producing meanings and benefits that extend beyond market exchange. The field therefore encourages policymakers and tourism managers to evaluate cultural resources through multidimensional approaches that recognize economic outcomes, non-market benefits, cultural significance, social participation, and long-term sustainability.



Figure 19. *Thailand's Khon Masked Dance Drama*
Source: bbc.com

A further development relevant to cultural economics is the emergence of the experience economy. Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue that economic value increasingly arises not only from goods and services but also from memorable experiences that engage consumers intellectually, emotionally, aesthetically, and personally. Within tourism, cultural resources acquire additional significance because they provide locally embedded meanings, narratives, practices, and settings from which distinctive experiences can be created. Heritage interpretation, storytelling, cultural performances, creative workshops, gastronomy, and interaction with local practitioners can transform cultural resources from objects of observation into opportunities for learning, participation, emotional engagement, and personal enrichment.

Recent research demonstrates that authenticity plays an important role in this process. In heritage tourism, visitors' perceptions of authentic cultural environments and traditions can strengthen the educational, aesthetic, entertainment, and escapist dimensions of the tourism experience while enhancing overall satisfaction (Zhu et al., 2025). Cultural resources therefore generate value not simply because they are available for tourism consumption but because they are interpreted and presented in ways that enable visitors to connect meaningfully with the histories, identities, and communities associated with them.

However, cultural economics also draws attention to tensions between economic utilization and cultural sustainability. As cultural resources gain commercial and tourism value, destinations may experience pressures to modify, simplify,

standardize, or stage cultural expressions according to market expectations. Empirical evidence indicates that excessive commercialization at cultural heritage attractions can weaken perceived authenticity and consequently reduce visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Cao et al., 2025). Heritage sites and living cultural practices may also become increasingly dependent on tourism revenue, exposing them to market fluctuations while encouraging the prioritization of commercially attractive expressions over practices of deeper cultural or community significance.

These challenges demonstrate that cultural sustainability cannot be achieved through conservation activities alone. It requires coordinated action at multiple levels, including responsible visitor behaviour, ethical tourism operations, community participation, institutional support, and appropriate public policy (Zhang et al., 2025). Governance systems must therefore balance economic objectives with cultural integrity, community authority, practitioner well-being, intergenerational transmission, and the long-term viability of cultural resources. Tourism development is most sustainable when economic benefits reinforce rather than replace the social meanings and cultural functions that make heritage and cultural practices valuable.

Recent international policy frameworks increasingly position culture as both a strategic resource for development and a development objective in its own right. UNESCO's global cultural-policy framework connects culture with cultural rights, education, climate action, digital transformation, resilience, and

inclusive development, while emphasizing the need to integrate culture more systematically into global, national, and local development agendas (UNESCO, 2025). UNCTAD similarly identifies the cultural and creative economy as a source of trade, employment, innovation, and economic diversification while drawing attention to challenges involving digital inequality, market concentration, intellectual property, and unequal access to creative opportunities (UNCTAD, 2024).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development further emphasizes that cultural and creative sectors contribute not only to employment and economic activity but also to innovation, entrepreneurship, social inclusion, well-being, and place-based development (OECD, 2022). Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that culture generates interconnected economic, social, symbolic, and experiential forms of value. Culture should therefore be treated not as a secondary policy concern or merely as an instrument for attracting tourists, but as an essential component of development strategies concerned with prosperity, inclusion, resilience, and long-term sustainability.

2.4 Soft Power Theory

Soft Power Theory has become an influential framework for understanding how countries exercise influence in contemporary international relations. Conventional perspectives on power traditionally emphasized military capabilities, economic resources, political authority, and the ability to compel others to comply with particular demands. However, increasing global interconnectedness, cross-border communication, cultural exchange, international mobility, and people-to-people interaction have drawn greater attention to forms of influence that operate through attraction, legitimacy, credibility, and persuasion rather than coercion.

Within this context, soft power provides a framework for explaining how countries shape international perceptions, establish relationships, and encourage external audiences to view their values, institutions, culture, and policies favourably. Soft power does not replace military or economic power. Rather, it identifies a different mechanism through which influence can be generated. While coercive power seeks to change behaviour through threats, force, sanctions, or payments, soft power operates by encouraging others to develop preferences that are compatible with the interests or objectives of the influencing country.

Joseph S. Nye introduced the concept of soft power in 1990 as part of a broader reconsideration of the changing nature of international power. Nye argued that power should not be understood solely as the ability to command others or compel them to act against their preferences. It also includes the capacity

to shape agendas, influence perceptions, and encourage others to support particular outcomes voluntarily. Soft power therefore refers to the ability to obtain desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 1990, 2004, 2021).

This perspective broadened traditional understandings of power by emphasizing the significance of intangible resources. National culture, political values, institutions, policies, reputation, education, scientific achievement, media, and international conduct may all contribute to attraction. However, these resources do not constitute soft power automatically. They become sources of soft power only when they are perceived positively by relevant external audiences and contribute to changes in preferences, attitudes, relationships, or behaviour.

The distinction between soft-power resources and soft-power outcomes is therefore important. A country may possess extensive cultural heritage, globally recognized products, prestigious universities, or successful creative industries without necessarily converting these resources into international influence. Their effectiveness depends on how they are interpreted, communicated, and experienced by others. Credibility, accessibility, consistency, institutional support, and audience receptiveness all influence whether a potential resource generates attraction or remains largely symbolic.

According to Nye (2004, 2021), a country's soft power derives principally from three sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture contributes to soft power when its expressions and practices are attractive to external audiences.

This may include heritage, cuisine, film, music, literature, sports, festivals, fashion, education, popular culture, creative industries, and everyday lifestyles. Cultural attraction can stimulate curiosity, familiarity, emotional attachment, and a willingness to engage more deeply with the country concerned.

Political values may become sources of soft power when they are practiced consistently and regarded as legitimate by both domestic and international audiences. Principles related to justice, human rights, social inclusion, political participation, cultural diversity, equality, and the rule of law may enhance a country's attractiveness when institutional practices correspond with the values being communicated. When substantial differences exist between stated values and observable conduct, credibility may weaken and soft-power potential may decline.

Foreign policy contributes to soft power when a country's international actions are regarded as legitimate, cooperative, competent, and attentive to wider global interests. Humanitarian assistance, international development cooperation, cultural exchange, peacebuilding, environmental leadership, educational partnerships, and constructive participation in international institutions may reinforce positive perceptions. Conversely, policies perceived as inconsistent, coercive, self-interested, or illegitimate may undermine the attractiveness generated by cultural or educational resources.

Soft power is therefore relational and audience-dependent. Countries cannot determine unilaterally which of their resources will be considered attractive or persuasive. Cultural meanings and political actions are interpreted differently

across societies, generations, and cultural contexts. A cultural product or national value that generates admiration among one audience may produce limited interest or even resistance among another. The effectiveness of soft power must consequently be evaluated from the perspectives of those being influenced rather than solely from the intentions of governments or cultural producers.

Soft power should also be distinguished from propaganda and short-term promotional communication. Promotion may increase visibility and awareness, but visibility alone does not necessarily generate attraction, trust, or influence. Soft power is more likely to develop through sustained relationships, credible institutions, meaningful exchanges, and consistency between national narratives and actual experiences. Attempts to manipulate perceptions without corresponding policies or behaviour may damage credibility and weaken long-term reputational value.

Although Nye's original framework identifies culture, political values, and foreign policy as the principal sources of soft power, contemporary measurement systems have expanded the range of dimensions used to assess how countries are perceived internationally. The Global Soft Power Index, for example, evaluates national perceptions through familiarity, reputation, and influence, together with eight broader pillars: Business and Trade, Governance, International Relations, Culture and Heritage, Media and Communication, Education and Science, People and Values, and Sustainable Future (Brand Finance, 2026).

Figure 20 illustrates these contemporary pillars of soft power, showing how a country's international influence may be reinforced through Business and Trade, Governance, International Relations, Culture and Heritage, Media and Communication, Education and Science, People and Values, and Sustainable Future. These pillars should be understood as an operational framework for assessing international perceptions rather than as a replacement for Nye's original theoretical sources.

The inclusion of these wider pillars reflects the multidimensional nature of contemporary international influence. Scientific capability, technological innovation, responsible business, effective governance, environmental leadership, trusted media, educational reputation, cultural attractiveness, and positive perceptions of a country's people may interact to shape its overall reputation. The strength of soft power therefore depends not on a single cultural product or promotional campaign but on the broader coherence of a country's institutions, values, policies, achievements, and international relationships.

Culture nevertheless remains one of the most visible and accessible foundations of soft power. Cultural resources allow international audiences to encounter a country through stories, images, performances, products, practices, places, and human relationships. Film, music, cuisine, heritage, sports, festivals, creative content, and tourism experiences can communicate national identity in ways that are emotionally engaging and readily shared across borders. Cultural attraction may

subsequently encourage interest in a country's language, products, educational institutions, tourism destinations, and wider society.

Tourism is particularly relevant to this process because it enables international audiences to experience elements of a country directly. Visitors encounter cultural heritage, landscapes, cuisine, hospitality, values, lifestyles, public institutions, and local communities through lived experience rather than official communication alone. These encounters may confirm, modify, or challenge pre-existing national images. Tourism therefore functions as an experiential channel through which potential soft-power resources are interpreted and converted into familiarity, attraction, trust, reputation, and international influence.

Soft Power Theory consequently provides an important foundation for examining the relationship among culture, tourism, national reputation, and international influence. It explains why the possession of cultural resources alone is insufficient and why their effects depend on credibility, interpretation, audience reception, institutional quality, and meaningful engagement. Within tourism studies, the framework is particularly useful for understanding how cultural capital can be transformed into experiences that strengthen destination attractiveness while contributing to wider perceptions of the nation.

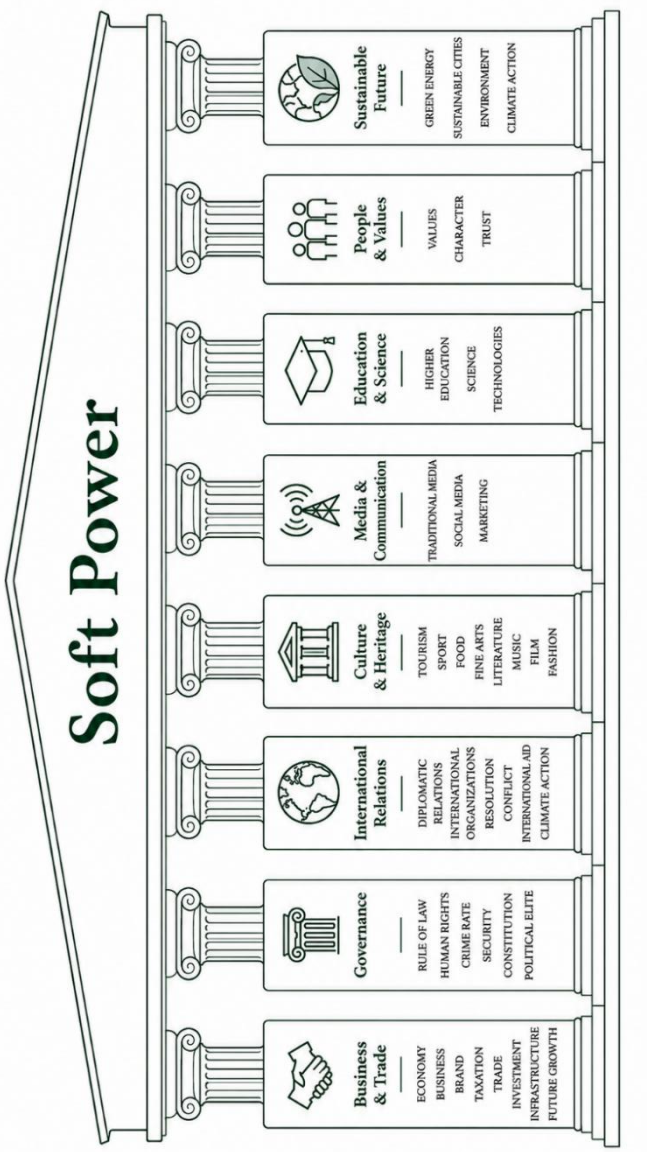


Figure 20. Contemporary Pillars of Soft Power
Source: Conceptualized by the authors based on brandfinance.com, with visual assistance from OpenAI

Subsequent scholarship has expanded Nye's original framework by emphasizing that soft power is not simply a stock of attractive national resources but a relational and audience-dependent process. Culture, values, institutions, and policies generate influence only when they are interpreted positively by external audiences and contribute to trust, credibility, attraction, or changes in preference. This perspective shifts attention from what a country possesses to how relationships are developed, how cultural meanings are communicated, and how international audiences receive and respond to them.

Public diplomacy plays an important role in this process by enabling governments and other national actors to communicate and engage directly with foreign publics. However, public diplomacy and soft power should not be treated as interchangeable concepts. Soft power describes the capacity to influence through attraction and persuasion, whereas public diplomacy refers to the communication and engagement practices through which governments and institutions attempt to build relationships, understanding, and favorable perceptions among international audiences. Cultural diplomacy represents a related but more specific process in which cultural exchange, artistic activities, education, heritage, and creative collaboration are used to develop cross-cultural relationships. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that cultural diplomacy involves actors operating at international, national, regional, local, and transnational levels rather than governments alone (Faucher, 2025; Grincheva, 2024).

Nation branding has further extended the practical application of soft power by focusing on how countries develop, communicate, and manage their identities and reputations among international audiences. Nation branding integrates areas such as tourism, culture, education, governance, business, innovation, and international relations. Nevertheless, nation branding should not be understood merely as advertising or image projection. A national reputation is shaped by accumulated experiences, institutional performance, policies, cultural products, media narratives, and the behavior of multiple public and private actors. Promotional communication may increase visibility, but lasting reputational value depends on credibility and consistency between the image presented internationally and the reality experienced by external audiences.

Tourism contributes significantly to this process because visitors form impressions of countries through direct encounters with places, people, institutions, services, and cultural environments. Positive experiences may strengthen perceptions of hospitality, creativity, safety, cultural richness, and quality of life, while negative encounters may challenge or weaken officially promoted national narratives. Tourists subsequently communicate these impressions through conversations, reviews, photographs, videos, and social media, allowing individual experiences to influence wider destination and national images.

Digital transformation has substantially changed the environments in which soft power and national reputation are produced. Governments now use websites, social media, digital campaigns, and official online accounts to communicate national

values, policy positions, technological achievements, and cultural identities. Digital diplomacy has become an important mechanism for national image management and international communication, allowing countries to reach global audiences directly and respond rapidly to emerging events (Villegas-Cruz, 2024).

However, digital influence is increasingly decentralized. National images are produced not only by governments but also by citizens, cultural practitioners, businesses, journalists, tourists, influencers, diaspora communities, streaming platforms, and algorithmically mediated networks. Cultural products and tourism narratives may circulate globally without direct state control, enabling external audiences to interpret, remix, support, criticize, or challenge official messages. Digital soft power is therefore shaped through continuous interaction among institutions, platforms, content creators, and audiences rather than through one-way communication alone.

Digital technologies also create vulnerabilities. Increased visibility does not necessarily produce trust, while highly confrontational or manipulative communication may generate negative reactions. Research on public diplomacy continues to demonstrate the difficulty of establishing whether communication activities produce meaningful changes in attitudes or behavior, highlighting the need to distinguish communication outputs from actual influence (Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023). Digital environments may also intensify disinformation, polarization, algorithmic inequality, and competition for attention, requiring soft-power strategies to

prioritize credibility, transparency, dialogue, and long-term relationships rather than visibility alone.

Culture remains one of the most accessible foundations of soft power within this changing environment. Heritage, cuisine, literature, music, film, television, festivals, sports, fashion, design, education, and everyday lifestyles provide symbolic and experiential resources through which external audiences encounter national identities. Cultural influence can produce curiosity, emotional attachment, familiarity, and a willingness to engage with a country's tourism destinations, products, language, educational institutions, and people.

Cultural diplomacy research increasingly emphasizes that these effects are generated through networks of state and non-state actors. Cultural institutions, artists, universities, museums, communities, tourism businesses, media organizations, and creative entrepreneurs all participate in communicating and negotiating national and cultural meanings. Culture therefore does not operate simply as content transmitted by governments. It functions through exchanges, collaborations, performances, experiences, and relationships that may support mutual understanding while also reflecting unequal power and competing interpretations (Faucher, 2025; Grincheva, 2024).

The growing policy interest in soft power has also stimulated efforts to measure national attraction and reputation. The Global Soft Power Index assesses international perceptions through three key performance indicators, Familiarity, Reputation, and Influence, together with eight pillars and 35 nation-brand attributes. These pillars cover Business and Trade,

Governance, International Relations, Culture and Heritage, Media and Communication, Education and Science, People and Values, and Sustainable Future (Brand Finance, 2026).

Such indices provide useful comparative information about how countries are perceived, but they should not be treated as complete measurements of political influence. Reputation surveys can identify perceived strengths and weaknesses, yet they cannot fully demonstrate whether favorable perceptions produce concrete diplomatic, economic, or behavioral outcomes. Soft-power measurement must therefore distinguish among resources, communication activities, audience perceptions, and observable influence.

Tourism occupies a distinctive position within Soft Power Theory because it combines cultural exposure with direct, embodied, and interpersonal experience. Unlike communication that reaches audiences primarily through media, tourism enables visitors to encounter landscapes, heritage, cuisine, religious practices, festivals, public spaces, service cultures, and local communities. These encounters may strengthen familiarity and attraction, but they may also expose inconsistencies between promoted images and lived realities. Tourism therefore functions as both a channel of soft power and a setting in which national reputation is tested.

The relationship between tourism and soft power can be observed in countries that have developed internationally recognizable cultural ecosystems. Japan combines heritage, cuisine, design, animation, popular culture, and technological reputation; South Korea has built international visibility through

music, television, film, cuisine, beauty, and digital culture; France and Italy draw upon heritage, arts, gastronomy, fashion, lifestyle, and creative industries. These examples demonstrate that cultural influence is rarely generated by a single product. It develops through interconnected institutions, industries, narratives, and visitor experiences.

Thailand provides a particularly relevant example. Thai cuisine, cultural heritage, festivals, traditional wellness practices, Buddhism, Muay Thai, crafts, hospitality, film, music, and local lifestyles contribute to international perceptions of the country. Through tourism, these cultural resources are encountered as experiences rather than merely as promotional symbols. Visitors consume Thai food, participate in festivals, visit temples and heritage sites, undertake wellness activities, attend sporting events, and interact with communities. These encounters can strengthen destination attractiveness and international familiarity while also supporting cultural industries and local economies.

Nevertheless, the conversion of Thai culture into soft power requires more than international promotion. Cultural attraction must be supported by credible institutions, quality visitor experiences, community participation, practitioner recognition, cultural integrity, and consistency between national narratives and observable conditions. Excessive commercialization, inaccurate representation, unequal benefit distribution, or poor visitor experiences may weaken rather than strengthen reputational value.

Soft Power Theory also continues to face conceptual and methodological criticism. The boundaries among soft power,

public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, nation branding, strategic communication, and propaganda are frequently blurred. Recent scholarship stresses that public diplomacy is an engagement practice, whereas soft power is a broader capacity to influence through attraction; the two may be connected but should not be treated as identical (Salman, 2025).

A further difficulty is establishing the relationship between attraction and actual outcomes. Favorable attitudes toward a country's cuisine, films, festivals, or tourism destinations do not necessarily result in political agreement or support for its foreign-policy objectives. Soft power is therefore more accurately understood as creating favorable conditions for influence rather than guaranteeing specific outcomes.

Despite these limitations, Soft Power Theory remains highly relevant to tourism because it highlights the strategic importance of culture, reputation, credibility, relationships, and audience interpretation. It explains how tourism can convert cultural resources into familiarity, emotional connection, positive reputation, and international attraction while also demonstrating that these outcomes depend on the quality and credibility of the experiences provided.

Ultimately, influence in the twenty-first century is produced through a combination of material capabilities, institutional behavior, communication, cultural attraction, and international relationships. Tourism represents one of the most direct mechanisms through which these dimensions intersect. Through travel, national identity is not simply promoted but experienced, interpreted, evaluated, and communicated by

visitors themselves. Soft Power Theory therefore provides a valuable framework for examining how cultural resources, tourism experiences, digital communication, and national reputation interact within contemporary international relations.

2.5 Nation Branding and Cultural Diplomacy

The growing interconnectedness of the contemporary world has transformed the ways in which nations compete, cooperate, and communicate. Military capacity, economic resources, and political influence remain important, but countries are also increasingly evaluated through less tangible qualities such as reputation, credibility, cultural attractiveness, institutional performance, and international visibility. In a global environment characterized by competition for tourists, investment, talent, trade, education, and influence, national reputation has become an important strategic asset. Governments, cultural institutions, businesses, tourism organizations, and civil-society actors therefore participate in shaping how countries are perceived by international audiences.

Nation branding and cultural diplomacy provide related but distinct frameworks for examining this process. Nation branding focuses primarily on the construction, communication, and management of national identity, image, and reputation. Cultural diplomacy, by contrast, emphasizes the use of cultural exchange, artistic practice, heritage, education, and interpersonal engagement to build relationships and mutual understanding across national boundaries. Both contribute to international visibility and attraction, but they operate through different

mechanisms and should not be treated as interchangeable concepts.

Nation branding refers to the strategic process through which a country seeks to differentiate itself and influence how it is perceived by external and domestic audiences. It draws upon culture, heritage, people, governance, tourism, business, education, innovation, public policy, and international conduct. Because a nation is a complex and contested social entity rather than a commercial product, nation branding cannot be reduced to the development of a logo, slogan, or promotional campaign. Instead, it is a long-term process of reputation formation shaped by policies, institutions, social conditions, cultural expressions, media narratives, and direct experiences of the country (Dinnie, 2022).

A country's projected identity should also be distinguished from its perceived image and established reputation. National identity refers to the characteristics, narratives, values, and aspirations through which a country presents and understands itself. National image concerns the immediate associations and impressions held by particular audiences, whereas reputation develops through the accumulation of judgments and experiences over time. Nation-branding strategies may attempt to influence these perceptions, but governments cannot control them completely. International audiences interpret national narratives through their own cultural backgrounds, media environments, political attitudes, and direct encounters with the country.

This distinction explains why nation branding extends beyond communication. Promotional messages may increase familiarity and visibility, but sustainable reputational improvement normally requires credible behaviour and consistency between national narratives and observable realities. A country promoted as welcoming, innovative, sustainable, or culturally diverse must demonstrate these qualities through visitor experiences, public institutions, policies, infrastructure, and social practices. When a substantial gap exists between the projected image and experienced reality, communication may be perceived as superficial or manipulative.

Contemporary scholarship also emphasizes that nation branding involves multiple actors. National governments may coordinate strategic direction, but tourism authorities, cultural institutions, universities, exporters, investors, athletes, artists, creative industries, local governments, residents, diaspora communities, tourists, and digital content creators all influence national image. Nation branding is therefore increasingly understood as a negotiated and co-created process rather than a message transmitted unilaterally by the state.

The potential economic significance of national reputation is considerable. A favourable national image may support tourism demand, export recognition, foreign investment, educational attractiveness, and the recruitment of skilled workers. A strong national brand can also strengthen country differentiation and contribute to trade, tourism, investment, public diplomacy, and broader international competitiveness (Dineri et al., 2024). However, these relationships are not

automatic. Reputation creates favourable conditions, but actual outcomes continue to depend on market access, institutional quality, infrastructure, policy consistency, service delivery, and visitor or investor experience.

Nation branding has important connections with place branding and destination branding, although the three concepts operate at different geographical and strategic levels. Destination branding focuses on the identity and image of a particular city, region, or tourism destination. Place branding may include tourism but also addresses investment, residence, business development, education, and quality of life. Nation branding operates at the national level and must accommodate diverse regional identities, social groups, economic sectors, and political narratives. Coordination among these levels is important because destination experiences can influence broader perceptions of the country, while national reputation shapes how individual destinations are interpreted.

Tourism is particularly important to nation branding because it provides international audiences with direct and embodied encounters with a country. Visitors experience landscapes, transport systems, public spaces, heritage, cuisine, accommodation, service practices, local communities, and everyday social environments. These encounters provide experiential evidence through which national narratives are confirmed, modified, or challenged. Tourism therefore contributes to reputation formation not only through advertising but also through the quality and credibility of the visitor experience.

Visitors subsequently communicate their experiences to others through reviews, photographs, videos, social-media posts, and personal recommendations. Tourists therefore become informal interpreters and communicators of national identity. This makes tourism branding increasingly decentralized because reputational narratives are produced jointly by official organizations, residents, businesses, visitors, creators, and digital platforms.

Cultural diplomacy complements nation branding by focusing more directly on cultural relationships and exchange. It involves the use of arts, heritage, language, education, literature, film, music, museums, festivals, sports, creative collaboration, and other cultural activities to communicate across borders. Cultural diplomacy may support national visibility and reputation, but its broader purpose lies in fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, sustained relationships, and opportunities for collaboration (Grincheva, 2024).

The distinction between cultural diplomacy and cultural promotion is important. Cultural promotion primarily seeks to increase the visibility or consumption of cultural products, whereas cultural diplomacy ideally involves reciprocal engagement. Exhibitions, performances, exchanges, festivals, residencies, educational partnerships, and heritage collaborations become diplomatically meaningful when they create spaces in which participants can interact, interpret cultural differences, and develop relationships over time. Contemporary cultural diplomacy increasingly involves actors at national, local,

institutional, community, and transnational levels rather than governments alone.

Nation branding and cultural diplomacy may reinforce one another. Cultural diplomacy can provide the relationships, credibility, and direct engagement that make national narratives more persuasive, while nation-branding strategies can provide coordination and visibility for cultural initiatives. However, tensions may arise when cultural activities are treated primarily as promotional instruments. Artistic freedom, cultural complexity, and reciprocal exchange may be weakened when culture is expected to communicate only favourable or simplified national images.

This tension highlights a central difference between branding and diplomacy. Branding often seeks differentiation, coherence, and competitive positioning, whereas diplomacy requires dialogue, negotiation, and sensitivity to diverse perspectives. A nation-branding campaign may emphasize a unified national story, while cultural diplomacy may reveal multiple identities, histories, and interpretations. Effective strategies should therefore avoid reducing cultural diversity to a single marketable narrative.

Cultural diplomacy also raises questions concerning representation and authority. Decisions must be made about which traditions, artists, communities, historical narratives, and cultural products are selected to represent the nation. These choices may increase the international visibility of certain cultural forms while marginalizing others. Inclusive cultural diplomacy therefore requires meaningful participation by

cultural practitioners and communities and should recognize that national culture is plural, dynamic, and continually negotiated.

Digital transformation has further changed both nation branding and cultural diplomacy. Social media, streaming platforms, virtual exhibitions, digital archives, online festivals, and creator networks allow cultural narratives to circulate rapidly across borders. Countries and cultural institutions can communicate directly with international audiences, while artists, tourists, residents, and diaspora communities can independently produce alternative interpretations of national identity. National reputation is therefore increasingly shaped within digital ecosystems that governments cannot fully control.

This decentralization creates both opportunities and risks. Digital platforms can expand cultural access, strengthen transnational communities, and provide visibility to cultural expressions that were previously overlooked. At the same time, algorithmic selection, misinformation, polarization, platform concentration, and unequal digital access can distort national images and privilege content that attracts attention rather than content that accurately represents cultural complexity.

Tourism provides an important point of intersection between nation branding and cultural diplomacy. A cultural festival, museum, heritage site, culinary route, creative district, or community-based tourism initiative may simultaneously function as a tourism product, a representation of place identity, and a setting for cross-cultural interaction. Tourism experiences can therefore contribute to national reputation while enabling cultural exchange and interpersonal understanding.

However, tourism should not be treated merely as a promotional channel. Visitors evaluate national narratives through actual experience, and local communities bear many of the social, cultural, and environmental consequences of tourism development. Nation-branding strategies that rely on cultural tourism must therefore be aligned with heritage conservation, community well-being, fair benefit distribution, cultural rights, and responsible visitor management.

Nation branding and cultural diplomacy should ultimately be understood as processes of relationship building rather than image control. National reputation is strengthened when communication is supported by credible institutions, meaningful cultural engagement, consistent policies, and positive lived experiences. Tourism can reinforce these processes by bringing international audiences into direct contact with places, communities, and cultural practices.

Together, nation branding and cultural diplomacy provide valuable frameworks for understanding how countries transform cultural resources into international visibility, attraction, trust, and reputational value. Their effectiveness, however, depends on authenticity, reciprocity, institutional credibility, inclusive representation, and consistency between the identities communicated internationally and the realities experienced by audiences.



Figure 21. The Emerald Buddha Temple, Bangkok
Source: Walia and Kaya via Pexels

Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that nation branding should not be understood merely as the centralized construction and communication of a favourable national image. National reputation emerges through interactions among governments, businesses, media organizations, cultural institutions, local authorities, citizens, diaspora communities, tourists, and digital content creators. These actors communicate different and sometimes competing interpretations of the nation through public policies, commercial products, cultural activities, media narratives, visitor experiences, and everyday social interactions. Nation branding is therefore increasingly regarded as a negotiated and co-created process rather than a message controlled exclusively by the state (Li et al., 2024).

International perceptions are influenced not only by official campaigns but also by institutional performance, cultural products, diplomatic conduct, public discourse, and direct encounters with a country. Promotional communication may increase familiarity and visibility, but it cannot independently establish a strong or enduring national reputation. Sustainable nation branding requires consistency between the identity communicated internationally and the political, social, cultural, and service realities experienced by external audiences. When official narratives conflict with observable conditions or visitor experiences, the credibility of the national brand may be weakened (Tijani et al., 2024).

Culture occupies a particularly important position within nation branding because it provides narratives, symbols, practices, and meanings through which countries can express

their distinctiveness. Cultural heritage, such as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok **(Figure 21)**, contributes to national identity while also shaping international awareness and attractiveness. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha is located within the Grand Palace complex and houses the Emerald Buddha, an object of national veneration in Thailand (The Grand Palace, 2026). Cultural resources are embedded within particular histories, communities, and social environments. Although cultural products or tourism activities may be imitated, their associated historical meanings, collective memories, and locally grounded relationships cannot easily be reproduced authentically elsewhere (Grincheva, 2024).

Culture may consequently contribute to nation-brand differentiation, destination image, international visibility, and reputational value. However, possessing extensive cultural resources does not automatically produce a strong national brand. Their contribution depends on how they are interpreted, safeguarded, communicated, and experienced by external audiences. Cultural narratives that are credible, inclusive, and connected to living communities are more likely to generate enduring reputational value than representations developed primarily for short-term.

Closely related to nation branding is cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of arts, heritage, education, language, museums, literature, film, music, festivals, sports, creative collaboration, and cultural exchange to foster communication and relationships across national boundaries. Whereas conventional diplomacy is often conducted through

formal negotiations among governments, cultural diplomacy engages wider publics and creates opportunities for interpersonal, institutional, and community-level interaction. Contemporary cultural diplomacy therefore involves governments as well as artists, universities, museums, cultural organizations, cities, communities, creative enterprises, and transnational networks.

The primary significance of cultural diplomacy lies not necessarily in immediate persuasion but in the gradual development of familiarity, dialogue, trust, and mutual understanding. Cultural exhibitions, artistic exchanges, educational partnerships, festivals, residencies, heritage cooperation, and collaborative creative projects can enable participants to encounter different perspectives and establish relationships over time. Cultural diplomacy is therefore most meaningful when it involves reciprocal engagement rather than one-way cultural promotion (Faucher, 2025).

This distinction is important because cultural promotion and cultural diplomacy do not necessarily produce identical outcomes. Cultural promotion primarily seeks to increase the visibility or consumption of cultural products, whereas cultural diplomacy ideally creates spaces for exchange, interpretation, and relationship building. A performance, exhibition, or festival may function primarily as promotion when it presents a favourable image to passive audiences. It becomes more diplomatically significant when it supports dialogue, participation, collaboration, and sustained interaction among individuals and institutions.

The increasing convergence of nation branding and cultural diplomacy reflects broader transformations in the nature of international influence. Both approaches recognize that culture can shape perceptions and strengthen international relationships. Nation branding focuses principally on differentiation, image, and reputation, whereas cultural diplomacy emphasizes communication, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding. Together, they may contribute to soft power by creating conditions in which international audiences become more familiar with, interested in, or positively disposed toward a country (Grincheva, 2024; Nye, 2022).

Nevertheless, nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and soft power should not be treated as interchangeable concepts. Nation branding is a strategic process concerned with identity and reputation. Cultural diplomacy is an engagement practice conducted through cultural resources, exchange, and relationships. Soft power refers to the broader capacity to influence preferences and outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Nation branding and cultural diplomacy may help activate soft-power resources, but neither guarantees that attraction will lead directly to specific behavioural, economic, or diplomatic outcomes.

Digital transformation has significantly expanded the scale and complexity of both nation branding and cultural diplomacy. Social media platforms, streaming services, virtual exhibitions, short-form videos, online communities, and user-generated content allow national and cultural narratives to reach international audiences rapidly. Governments and cultural

institutions can communicate directly with foreign publics, while artists, residents, tourists, influencers, businesses, and diaspora communities can independently produce and circulate their own interpretations of national identity (Li et al., 2024; Villegas-Cruz, 2024).

Consequently, digital nation branding is increasingly participatory and decentralized. Research on virtual communities demonstrates that social-media users can co-create, curate, and communicate nation-brand meanings through their interactions and shared content (Li et al., 2024). National reputation is therefore shaped not only by content produced by official organizations but also by the visibility, credibility, and emotional appeal of narratives circulating through digital networks.

This decentralization creates important opportunities. Digital technologies can broaden access to cultural resources, support international communities, extend the reach of cultural institutions, and provide visibility to cultural practitioners or local identities that might otherwise remain overlooked. Digital platforms also enable visitors and cultural participants to share their experiences immediately with audiences beyond the destination.

At the same time, digital platforms reduce governmental control over national narratives and introduce new risks. Algorithmic selection, misinformation, polarization, platform concentration, and competition for attention may privilege simplified or sensational representations. A widely circulated negative event or visitor experience can challenge established promotional narratives. Digital visibility should therefore not be

confused with reputational credibility, which depends on reliable institutions, authentic experiences, responsible communication, and sustained audience relationships.

Tourism occupies a distinctive position within this broader framework because it combines communication, cultural exchange, and lived experience. Unlike advertising campaigns or diplomatic statements, tourism enables individuals to encounter a country directly. Visitors interact with local residents, service providers, cultural practitioners, public institutions, transport systems, landscapes, heritage sites, cuisine, festivals, religious practices, and everyday lifestyles. These encounters provide experiential evidence through which national narratives may be confirmed, modified, or rejected (Casado Claro et al., 2023; Dinnie, 2022).

Tourism therefore functions simultaneously as a nation-branding platform, a setting for cultural diplomacy, and a potential channel of soft power. Through travel, culture is not merely represented but experienced through sight, sound, taste, movement, conversation, and participation. These multisensory and interpersonal encounters can generate emotional connections and memories that shape perceptions more deeply than conventional promotional communication (Casado Claro et al., 2023).

From a nation-branding perspective, tourism is one of the most visible expressions of national identity. Destinations communicate narratives about history, values, creativity, lifestyles, and social character through the experiences they provide. Visitor satisfaction, perceived authenticity, service

quality, safety, accessibility, and interactions with host communities may consequently influence not only destination image but also broader impressions of the country.

Tourists also communicate these impressions through reviews, photographs, videos, social-media posts, and personal recommendations. They function as informal interpreters of the nation for relatives, friends, followers, and digital communities. Their narratives may enhance official branding efforts, but they may also expose contradictions between promoted images and actual experiences. Tourism branding is therefore increasingly co-produced by public authorities, tourism businesses, residents, visitors, creators, and digital platforms (Li et al., 2024).

The role of culture in nation branding can be observed in countries with internationally recognizable cultural ecosystems. Japan combines heritage, cuisine, design, animation, technological capability, and popular culture within its international image. In the *Global Soft Power Index 2026*, Japan ranked third in the Culture and Heritage pillar and recorded strong perceptions concerning lifestyle appeal and tourism attractiveness (Brand Finance, 2026). South Korea has similarly expanded its international visibility through music, television, film, beauty, cuisine, innovation, and digital culture, while France and Italy continue to benefit from strong international associations with heritage, gastronomy, fashion, design, and the arts (Brand Finance, 2026; Kim & Nicolau, 2025).

These examples demonstrate that reputational value rarely derives from a single cultural product. It develops through interactions among creative industries, cultural institutions,

public policies, businesses, tourism experiences, and international audiences. Popular culture may also produce economic spillovers beyond its immediate sector by strengthening destination-brand equity and increasing the market value of tourism-related businesses associated with the country of origin.

Thailand provides a particularly relevant setting in which nation branding, cultural diplomacy, tourism, and soft power intersect. Thai cuisine, cultural heritage, Buddhism, festivals, wellness traditions, Muay Thai, crafts, film, fashion, hospitality, music, and local lifestyles contribute to international perceptions of the country. These resources are communicated through tourism campaigns, cultural events, creative industries, international exhibitions, digital media, and direct visitor experiences (TAT, 2025).

Recent initiatives indicate growing policy interest in mobilizing Thai culture for international tourism and soft-power development. Thailand's presentation at ITB Berlin 2025 included a dedicated soft-power area organized around Food, Fashion, Fight, Festivals, and Film, while connecting these themes with sustainable tourism and provincial destinations. The Splash Soft Power Forum 2025 broadened this agenda to include food, film, tourism, music, fashion, Muay Thai, arts, design, gaming, books, television series, festivals, and wellness, demonstrating an increasingly diversified approach to Thailand's creative and cultural sectors (TAT, 2025).

Tourism provides a central platform through which these cultural resources become visible and experiential. Visitors do

not simply receive messages about Thai culture; they taste Thai food, attend festivals, visit temples and heritage sites, undertake wellness activities, observe or practise Muay Thai, purchase crafts, watch performances, and interact with local communities. Such encounters can contribute to destination attractiveness, national familiarity, and international goodwill while supporting cultural practitioners, tourism businesses, and local economies (Casado Claro et al., 2023). TAT's recent international creator campaigns similarly use direct cultural encounters and digital storytelling to connect Thai cultural resources with global audiences (TAT, 2025).

However, transforming cultural resources into nation-brand and soft-power assets requires more than international promotion. Cultural attraction must be supported by appropriate infrastructure, high-quality visitor experiences, credible institutions, cultural integrity, practitioner recognition, and meaningful community participation. Promotional campaigns that are disconnected from lived realities may weaken trust, while excessive commercialization may simplify cultural identities or reduce living traditions to standardized, marketable images (Cao et al., 2025; Dinnie, 2022).

Representation presents another important challenge. Nation-branding strategies frequently seek coherent and recognizable narratives, but national cultures are diverse, dynamic, and contested. Decisions about which regions, communities, traditions, lifestyles, and identities are selected to represent the nation may increase the visibility of certain cultural forms while marginalizing others. Inclusive branding and

cultural diplomacy therefore require consultation with cultural practitioners, communities, and stakeholders whose identities and knowledge are being represented.

The relationship between branding and cultural sustainability must also be considered. Increased visibility may attract visitors, investment, and media attention, but it may also generate overcrowding, commercialization, cultural appropriation, or unequal benefit distribution. Effective strategies must consequently align reputational objectives with heritage conservation, cultural rights, community well-being, responsible visitor management, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Cao et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

Nation branding and cultural diplomacy should ultimately be understood as processes of relationship building rather than image control. Governments and tourism authorities may coordinate strategies, but they cannot manufacture reputation independently of public policies, institutional performance, community participation, and audience experiences. Trust and attractiveness emerge gradually through consistency between communicated identities and observable realities.

Nation branding and cultural diplomacy therefore demonstrate that culture functions as more than a symbolic expression of national identity. Cultural resources can contribute to international visibility, differentiation, trust, relationship building, and reputational value. In a global environment in which countries increasingly compete for attention, mobility, talent, investment, tourism, and influence, the capacity to communicate and embody cultural identity credibly has become

an important dimension of national competitiveness (Dinnie, 2022; Tijani et al., 2024).

Tourism occupies a central role within this process because it transforms cultural narratives into lived experiences. It enables international audiences to encounter, interpret, evaluate, and communicate national identity through direct engagement with places and people. Tourism is consequently one of the most significant arenas through which nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and soft power interact in practice.

2.6 Tourism as a Soft Power Instrument

Tourism has emerged as an important channel through which countries communicate and potentially generate soft power. Although tourism is commonly evaluated in terms of visitor expenditure, employment, investment, and foreign-exchange earnings, its broader significance lies in its ability to shape perceptions, facilitate cultural exchange, and strengthen relationships between societies. Unlike communication that operates primarily through mediated representations, tourism enables visitors to encounter destinations directly through their cultures, institutions, values, lifestyles, traditions, and everyday social environments. Tourism can therefore transform cultural attraction into familiarity, positive reputation, and international influence (Casado Claro et al., 2023).

The relationship between tourism and soft power is rooted in the principle of attraction. Soft power arises when external audiences develop favourable attitudes or preferences

toward a country because they are attracted to its culture, values, policies, institutions, or achievements rather than compelled through coercion or payment (Nye, 2004, 2022). Tourism reflects this principle because travel decisions are largely voluntary and influenced by perceptions of destination attractiveness. Destinations compete not only through accessibility, infrastructure, price, and service quality but also through heritage, gastronomy, creativity, hospitality, cultural practices, and lifestyle experiences.

Tourism resources, however, do not generate soft power automatically. A country may possess internationally recognized heritage, cuisine, festivals, landscapes, or creative industries without successfully converting these resources into sustained international influence. This conversion depends on the quality and credibility of visitor experiences, the meanings tourists attach to those experiences, and the extent to which favourable perceptions extend beyond the immediate tourism encounter. Tourism should therefore be understood as a potential channel of soft power rather than as evidence that influence has necessarily been achieved.

One of the principal mechanisms through which tourism contributes to soft power is experiential engagement. Visitors explore heritage environments, participate in cultural activities, consume local products, observe social practices, and interact with host communities. These encounters may generate emotional connections, cultural learning, and personal memories that influence attitudes more deeply than one-way promotional communication. Tourism may therefore function as a form of

experiential diplomacy in which perceptions are shaped through direct and embodied encounters with places and people (Casado Claro et al., 2023).

The quality of host–guest interaction is particularly important. Tourism does not always produce mutual understanding, especially when encounters are superficial, unequal, or constrained by language and cultural differences. Nevertheless, meaningful and respectful interaction can strengthen emotional solidarity, reduce negative stereotypes, and improve understanding between visitors and residents. Tourism's contribution to soft power consequently depends not only on attracting visitors but also on creating opportunities for reciprocal cultural engagement (Tan & Hsu, 2024).

Destination-image formation represents another important mechanism. Direct travel experience provides visitors with evidence through which previously formed images of a destination may be confirmed, modified, or rejected. Encounters with residents, public services, cultural resources, tourism environments, and local lifestyles can influence perceptions of hospitality, authenticity, safety, cultural richness, and overall attractiveness. Positive experiences may strengthen destination reputation and visitor loyalty, while poor service, discrimination, congestion, safety concerns, or misleading promotion may weaken both destination image and broader perceptions of the country (Li et al., 2023).

The influence of tourism is further amplified through digital communication. Visitors routinely share photographs, videos, reviews, stories, and evaluations through social media,

travel platforms, and online communities. Tourism experiences are consequently communicated far beyond the physical period of travel and may influence audiences who have never encountered official tourism campaigns. Tourists, residents, cultural practitioners, influencers, and tourism businesses therefore participate in the co-creation of destination narratives and international perceptions (Huang et al., 2024).

Digital communication also reduces the ability of governments and destination organizations to control national narratives. User-generated content may enhance credibility because it appears to reflect personal experience, but it can also circulate stereotypes, simplified cultural representations, misinformation, or isolated negative incidents. Tourism-related soft power is therefore increasingly shaped through interactions among official institutions, digital platforms, content creators, visitors, and online audiences rather than through government communication alone.

Cultural experiences provide another significant pathway through which tourism can generate attraction. Heritage sites, festivals, gastronomy, performing arts, sports, wellness traditions, religious practices, and creative industries enable visitors to engage with cultural expressions associated with particular destinations. These experiences may generate curiosity, admiration, emotional attachment, and wider interest in a country's people, language, products, and cultural life. Tourism consequently provides a mechanism through which cultural capital can be transformed into experiential and symbolic value.

The Giant Asura Guardians at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok provide a clear example of how material heritage communicates cultural narratives through tourism **(Figure 22)**. Six pairs of guardian figures stand within the temple compound and represent characters from the Thai *Ramakien*. They connect architecture and visual art with literature, royal history, religious space, and national cultural memory. For visitors, the figures may therefore serve not merely as decorative objects but as points of entry into broader understandings of Thai artistic traditions and cultural identity (The Grand Palace, 2026).

Cultural visibility alone, however, is insufficient to produce meaningful soft power. Cultural resources require interpretation that enables visitors to understand their historical, spiritual, artistic, and social significance. Without appropriate storytelling, guidance, and opportunities for learning, heritage may be consumed primarily as visual scenery. The effectiveness of tourism-related soft power therefore depends partly on a destination's ability to transform cultural objects and practices into credible, respectful, and meaningful experiences.

Tourism as a soft-power instrument should consequently be evaluated through more than visitor arrivals, expenditure, media exposure, or social-media reach. Relevant outcomes include changes in familiarity, trust, destination image, intercultural attitudes, willingness to recommend, and continued engagement with the country. Although these outcomes do not necessarily demonstrate direct political influence, they may

create favourable conditions for longer-term cultural, educational, economic, and diplomatic relationships.

Tourism occupies a distinctive position within soft-power processes because it connects cultural resources with direct experience, interpersonal relationships, destination image, and digital communication. Its influence is neither automatic nor fully controllable. Tourism contributes most effectively to soft power when cultural attractiveness is supported by credible institutions, high-quality visitor experiences, meaningful host–guest interaction, responsible cultural representation, and consistency between the national image communicated internationally and the realities encountered by visitors.







Figure 22. The Giant Asura Guardians
Source: royalgrandpalace.th

The growing integration of tourism and nation branding reinforces tourism's potential as a soft-power instrument. Tourism represents one of the most visible and experiential expressions of national identity because it enables international audiences to encounter cultural narratives through places, people, services, and everyday life. Positive visitor experiences may strengthen perceptions of hospitality, creativity, cultural richness, safety, and social openness, thereby contributing to destination image and the broader reputation of the country. Tourism therefore supports nation-branding objectives not only by increasing international visibility but also by creating credible experiences through which national identity is interpreted and evaluated (Dinnie, 2022).

Thai gastronomy provides a compelling illustration of tourism-related soft power. Food frequently serves as an accessible entry point through which international visitors encounter Thai history, local knowledge, social practices, and cultural identity. Traditional wellness practices, meditation experiences, and Muay Thai similarly broaden Thailand's cultural appeal and strengthen its association with well-being, vitality, and distinctive cultural traditions. Recent Thai tourism initiatives have consequently positioned gastronomy, wellness, Muay Thai, festivals, crafts, and other creative expressions as central components of the country's tourism and soft-power strategy. *Nuad Thai*, which UNESCO recognizes as part of the art, science, and culture of traditional Thai healthcare, further demonstrates how locally embedded knowledge can acquire international visibility while retaining cultural significance (TAT, 2025; UNESCO, 2026).

Despite its considerable potential, tourism as a soft-power instrument presents important challenges. Overtourism, environmental pressure, excessive commercialization, cultural simplification, safety concerns, and negative visitor experiences can undermine destination attractiveness and weaken reputational value. Commercial adaptation may also reduce perceived authenticity when cultural practices and heritage resources are redesigned primarily to meet market expectations. Effective tourism management must therefore balance economic objectives with cultural integrity, community participation, practitioner well-being, environmental responsibility, and long-term cultural sustainability (Cao et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

Tourism represents an important mechanism through which cultural resources can be translated into international familiarity, attraction, and reputational influence. By facilitating cultural exchange, direct engagement, and emotional connections between visitors and destinations, tourism can contribute to nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and broader soft-power objectives. Understanding tourism through this perspective provides valuable insights into how destinations can mobilize cultural capital not only to attract visitors but also to build relationships, strengthen international reputation, and enhance their position within an increasingly competitive global environment (Casado Claro et al., 2023).

2.7 The Cultural Capital Framework for Tourism Management

The preceding sections demonstrate that cultural capital, cultural economics, soft power, nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and tourism are closely interconnected. Cultural resources can support identity, creativity, social relationships, economic activity, destination differentiation, and international attraction. Although each body of scholarship offers important insights, these relationships are often examined through separate disciplinary perspectives. Cultural capital theory focuses primarily on the accumulation, recognition, and conversion of cultural resources; cultural economics examines multidimensional value creation; soft power and nation branding address attraction and reputation; and tourism studies emphasize destination development and visitor experience. An integrated perspective is therefore needed to explain how cultural resources move through these processes and generate broader developmental outcomes (Bille, 2024; Nye, 2021; Richards, 2021).

To address this need, this book proposes *the Cultural Capital Framework for Tourism Management (CFCTM)* **(Figure 23)**. The framework is an original synthesis of Cultural Capital Theory, cultural economics, Soft Power Theory, nation branding, and contemporary cultural-tourism research. Rather than treating culture merely as a collection of attractions, the CFCTM conceptualizes it as a strategic resource that can be safeguarded, interpreted, activated, and transformed into economic, social, cultural, symbolic, experiential, and reputational value (Bourdieu, 1986; Dinnie, 2022; Nye, 2021; Richards, 2021).

At the foundation of the framework is *Cultural Capital*, which constitutes the principal resource base for cultural tourism development. Following Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is organized into embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms. Embodied cultural capital includes knowledge, skills, language, traditions, craftsmanship, culinary expertise, artistic competence, and other culturally informed capacities carried by individuals and practitioners. Objectified cultural capital comprises material expressions such as artworks, artifacts, manuscripts, monuments, museums, historic buildings, and cultural landscapes. Institutionalized cultural capital refers directly to formally recognized qualifications and credentials. At the destination level, heritage inscriptions, geographical indications, professional licences, and accreditation systems may be interpreted more broadly as mechanisms of institutional validation that confer legitimacy, visibility, and symbolic recognition upon cultural resources.

The second component consists of *Value Transformation Processes*. Cultural resources do not automatically produce tourism or developmental benefits simply because they exist. Their activation requires preservation, interpretation, innovation, communication, experience design, stakeholder collaboration, and appropriate institutional support. Storytelling, heritage management, festivals, creative industries, gastronomy, digital media, cultural programming, and community-based tourism can transform culturally embedded knowledge and resources into accessible and meaningful tourism experiences. The effectiveness of this transformation depends on the participation of cultural practitioners and communities, not solely on the

decisions of tourism businesses or public agencies (Richards, 2021; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

The third component is *Tourism Experience Creation*, which represents the interface through which visitors encounter, interpret, and engage with cultural capital. Contemporary cultural tourism increasingly extends beyond passive observation toward learning, participation, creativity, and interaction with places and people. Heritage tourism, gastronomy tourism, wellness tourism, creative tourism, religious tourism, festival tourism, and community-based tourism provide different pathways through which cultural resources can be experienced. Through interpretation and participation, visitors may develop knowledge, emotional attachment, intercultural understanding, personal enrichment, and memorable connections with destinations (Richards, 2021).

The fourth component comprises *Multidimensional Value Outcomes*. Cultural tourism may generate several forms of value simultaneously. Economic value includes visitor expenditure, employment, entrepreneurship, investment, and local business development. Social value includes participation, collaboration, empowerment, social cohesion, and community well-being. Cultural value encompasses heritage safeguarding, knowledge transmission, creativity, cultural continuity, and identity reinforcement. Symbolic value involves authenticity, prestige, recognition, reputation, and destination distinctiveness, while experiential value emerges through visitor learning, emotion, participation, and personal meaning. These outcomes may also create benefits that extend beyond direct tourism transactions

and contribute to wider community and territorial development (Bille, 2024; OECD, 2022).

The fifth component involves *Soft Power and International Influence*. Tourism communicates cultural resources to international audiences through direct experience. Visitors encounter heritage, cuisine, festivals, creative industries, wellness traditions, religious practices, and everyday lifestyles and subsequently interpret and communicate these experiences through personal networks and digital platforms. Positive encounters may contribute to destination image, national reputation, familiarity, and cultural attraction. Tourism can consequently support nation branding and cultural diplomacy by converting cultural and symbolic resources into favourable international perceptions. However, attraction should not be assumed to produce political or diplomatic influence automatically; it creates favourable conditions through which longer-term relationships and influence may develop (Casado Claro et al., 2023; Dinnie, 2022; Nye, 2021).

The framework culminates in *Sustainable Destination Competitiveness*. Within the CFCTM, competitiveness is not defined solely by visitor numbers, tourism expenditure, or market share. It refers to a destination's long-term capacity to maintain cultural distinctiveness, provide meaningful visitor experiences, support community well-being, encourage innovation, and adapt to social, economic, environmental, and technological change. Sustainable competitiveness requires a balance among cultural preservation, economic viability,

environmental responsibility, community interests, and international attractiveness (Zhang et al., 2025).

Governance, community agency, stakeholder participation, ethical representation, and cultural sustainability operate as cross-cutting conditions throughout the framework. These conditions influence who controls cultural resources, which cultural expressions receive recognition, how tourism experiences are designed, and how benefits are distributed. The CFCTM should therefore not be interpreted as a simple linear process in which culture is converted into tourism revenue. Cultural transformation is iterative and relational. Tourism outcomes may be reinvested in conservation, education, practitioner development, institutional capacity, and cultural renewal, thereby strengthening or regenerating the original cultural-capital base.

Feedback relationships connect these components. Visitor experiences can reshape destination narratives; institutional recognition can enhance symbolic value; economic returns can support cultural preservation; and community participation can strengthen both cultural continuity and destination resilience. Conversely, commercialization, inappropriate representation, unequal benefit distribution, and excessive visitor pressure may weaken cultural capital and reduce the long-term competitiveness of the destination.

In Thailand, the CFCTM provides a useful lens for examining how cultural heritage, gastronomy, wellness traditions, Muay Thai, festivals, crafts, creative industries, religious practices, and community lifestyles contribute to

tourism development and international visibility. Recent tourism initiatives increasingly combine cultural storytelling, immersive experiences, creative collaboration, sustainability, and digital communication, while community-based creative tourism demonstrates how cultural resources can interact with social, human, institutional, and economic capacities to support local development (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2025).

The CFCTM therefore offers a holistic theoretical foundation for the chapters that follow. It explains how cultural resources can be mobilized through tourism while emphasizing that successful transformation depends on preservation, interpretation, community authority, institutional support, and responsible management. Applied carefully, the framework can guide destinations in creating tourism systems that are economically productive, culturally sustainable, socially inclusive, internationally attractive, and resilient over time.

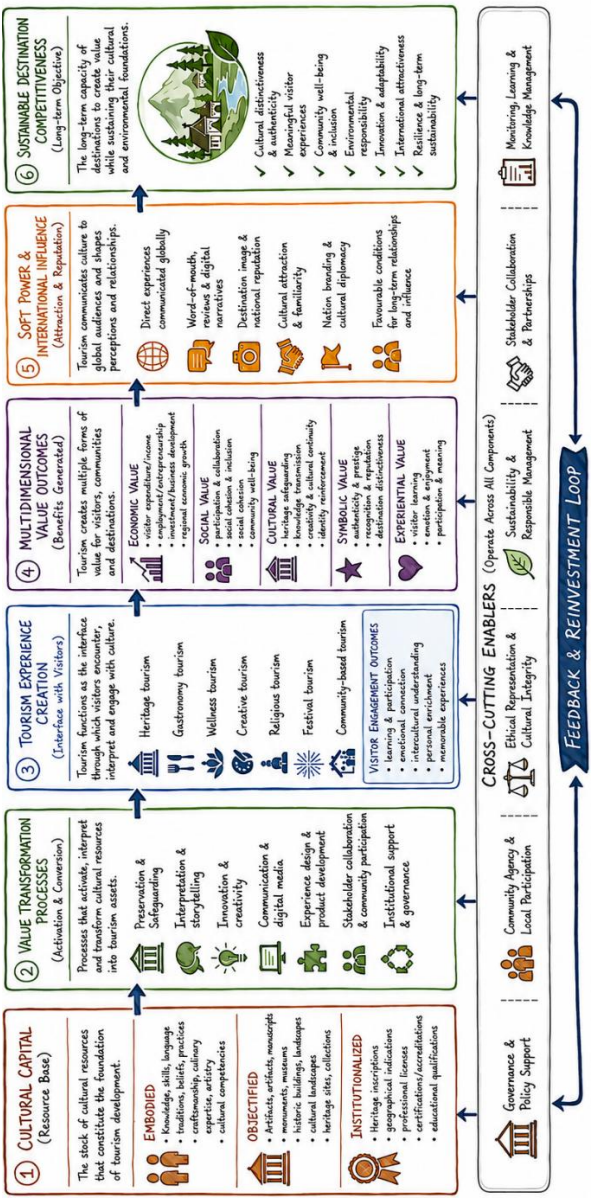


Figure 23. The Cultural Capital Framework for Tourism Management
Source: Conceptualized by the authors, with visual assistance from OpenAI.

2.8 Applying Framework to Thailand

As one of the world's leading tourism destinations, Thailand possesses a rich and diverse portfolio of cultural resources that have contributed significantly to its tourism development, international reputation, and economic growth. The country's success demonstrates how cultural capital can be strategically transformed into tourism value, destination competitiveness, and soft power influence.

The framework identifies six dimensions of cultural capital that are highly evident within the Thai context. First, *heritage capital* is reflected in Thailand's extensive historical and cultural resources, including ancient cities, archaeological sites, royal heritage, traditional architecture, and religious landmarks. The Historic City of Ayutthaya and the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns represent internationally recognized examples of cultural heritage that contribute to both tourism attractiveness and national identity.

Second, *gastronomic capital* is embodied in Thailand's globally recognized culinary traditions. Thai cuisine has evolved beyond a cultural practice to become one of the country's most influential cultural assets. Food experiences serve not only as tourism attractions but also as mechanisms for cultural exchange, destination branding, and international recognition. The growing global popularity of Thai cuisine illustrates how cultural resources can generate economic, symbolic, and diplomatic value simultaneously.

Third, *wellness capital* is represented by Thailand's long-established traditions of holistic health, traditional Thai massage,

herbal knowledge, meditation practices, and wellness services. These resources have positioned Thailand as a leading destination for wellness tourism and contribute significantly to the country's international image as a place associated with well-being, healing, and quality of life.

Fourth, *spiritual capital* derives primarily from Thailand's Buddhist heritage and associated cultural practices. Temples, pilgrimage sites, religious festivals, meditation traditions, and spiritual lifestyles provide distinctive tourism experiences that attract visitors seeking cultural learning, reflection, and personal transformation. Spiritual capital therefore contributes to both tourism development and cultural continuity.

Fifth, *creative capital* is evident in Thailand's festivals, performing arts, handicrafts, design industries, film production, cultural events, and emerging creative sectors. These resources demonstrate the dynamic and evolving nature of Thai culture while providing opportunities for innovation, cultural entrepreneurship, and experience creation. Creative capital enables destinations to continually reinterpret cultural traditions in ways that remain relevant to contemporary visitors and global audiences.

Sixth, *hospitality capital* represents one of Thailand's most distinctive competitive advantages. Internationally recognized service quality, friendliness, cultural openness, and hospitality practices contribute significantly to visitor satisfaction and destination reputation. Hospitality capital functions as an important form of embodied cultural capital that

enhances tourism experiences and reinforces positive perceptions of Thailand among international visitors.

Within the CFCTM framework, these six forms of cultural capital constitute the foundational resources that support tourism development. Through soft power mechanisms such as attraction, authenticity, storytelling, identity formation, emotional connection, and global visibility, these resources are transformed into meaningful visitor experiences and broader development outcomes. Tourism serves as the platform through which cultural resources are interpreted, experienced, and communicated to domestic and international audiences.

The outcomes generated through this process are multidimensional. Economically, cultural tourism contributes to employment, entrepreneurship, local business development, and tourism revenue. Socially, it supports community participation, local pride, and cultural continuity. Culturally, it encourages heritage conservation, knowledge transmission, and creative innovation. Internationally, it enhances Thailand's destination image, nation brand, and soft power influence. These outcomes collectively contribute to sustainable destination competitiveness and long-term development.

Thailand is therefore more than a successful tourism destination; it represents a valuable case through which the relationships among cultural capital, tourism, soft power, and sustainable development can be examined in an integrated manner. The CFCTM framework provides a conceptual lens for understanding how Thailand has leveraged its cultural resources to create tourism value while simultaneously strengthening

cultural identity, international reputation, and national competitiveness.

The following chapters apply this framework to explore the various dimensions of Thailand's cultural capital in greater detail. Through an examination of heritage, gastronomy, wellness traditions, spirituality, creative industries, and hospitality culture, the book demonstrates how cultural resources can be strategically managed to support tourism development, soft power generation, and sustainable development in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 3
Thailand's Cultural Capital

3.1 Historical Foundations

Understanding Thailand's contemporary tourism landscape requires consideration of the historical processes that have shaped its cultural resources, national identity, religious traditions, and heritage environments. Centuries of political transformation, regional interaction, migration, trade, and social adaptation have produced a diverse cultural landscape that remains central to the country's tourism appeal. Historic cities, archaeological sites, religious monuments, traditional knowledge, cultural landscapes, and living heritage practices collectively support cultural tourism while contributing to Thailand's distinctive international image (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022).

Thailand's historical development reflects a continuing process of cultural exchange and local adaptation. Located within regional networks linking South, Southeast, and East Asia, the territory of present-day Thailand participated in long-established movements of people, goods, religious ideas, artistic traditions, and political practices. Cultural and commercial contact with India contributed to the spread and adaptation of Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions, while migration and trade from southern China influenced commerce, urban society, cuisine, and patterns of social development. These external influences were not simply adopted in their original forms but were selectively incorporated into local cultural systems,

contributing to the development of distinctive Thai identities and traditions (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; Singh, 2022).

The earliest foundations of cultural development in the territory of present-day Thailand can be traced to prehistoric settlements and agrarian communities that existed long before the formation of historically documented kingdoms. Ban Chiang Archaeological Site **(Figure 24)** provides one of the most significant records of this early development. Archaeological evidence from the site documents settled agricultural life, wet-rice cultivation, ceramic production, animal domestication, and the manufacture and use of metal tools. Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992, Ban Chiang is internationally recognized for its contribution to understanding prehistoric cultural, social, and technological development in Southeast Asia (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

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Figure 24. Ban Chiang Archaeological Site
Source: thailandfoundation.or.th

The development of early urban societies became increasingly visible during the Dvaravati period, broadly extending from the sixth to the eleventh centuries CE. Archaeological sites such as Si Thep and Phu Phrabat demonstrate the development of urban planning, religious architecture, monastic traditions, and distinctive artistic practices. Dvaravati culture reflected sustained interaction with Indian religious and artistic traditions, including Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Hinduism, which were selectively adapted to local contexts. These processes of cultural exchange and adaptation contributed to religious landscapes and artistic traditions that influenced later cultural development in the region (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

The emergence of the Sukhothai Kingdom in the thirteenth century represents a pivotal period in the formation of the early Siamese state. UNESCO identifies Sukhothai as the capital of the first Kingdom of Siam during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Together with Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet, Sukhothai developed shared administrative, legal, linguistic, religious, and infrastructural systems. Its surviving inscriptions provide some of the earliest evidence of Thai writing and offer important accounts of governance, religion, social organization, and economic life. Under royal patronage, Buddhism flourished, while distinctive achievements in architecture, sculpture, ceramics, and water management contributed to the development of what became known as the Sukhothai style (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

The kingdom's historical influence remains visible through its temples, monuments, inscriptions, sculptures, and

cultural landscapes. Today, the Historic Town of Sukhothai and its Associated Historic Towns **(Figure 25)** constitute an internationally recognized heritage property that communicates the artistic, religious, political, and technological achievements of early Siam. The site consequently functions not only as an important cultural tourism destination but also as a prominent representation of Thailand's historical development and national cultural identity (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).



Figure 25. Wat Mahathat in Sukhothai
Source: thailandfoundation.or.th and thailandtourismdirectory.go.th

Following the gradual decline of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya emerged in the mid-fourteenth century as the second major capital of Siam. Founded around 1350, the city developed into one of the largest and most cosmopolitan urban centres of its time and became an important hub of regional and international commerce and diplomacy. Its strategic location on an island surrounded by three rivers connected Ayutthaya to maritime trading networks linking East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Merchants, missionaries, diplomats, and foreign residents contributed to a culturally diverse urban society in which external artistic, commercial, religious, and technological influences were selectively adapted into local cultural systems (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Ayutthaya's historical significance extends beyond its political and commercial achievements. The kingdom produced distinctive developments in architecture, urban planning, Buddhist art, craftsmanship, and religious culture that influenced later periods of Thai history. Following the destruction of the city in 1767 **(Figure 26)**, Ayutthaya was not rebuilt in its original location, leaving an extensive archaeological landscape characterized by monumental monasteries, reliquary towers, sculptures, and the remains of palaces and civic structures. Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1991, the Historic City of Ayutthaya now functions as a major heritage tourism destination and an important expression of Thailand's historical identity and cultural capital (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).



Figure 26. The siege of Ayutthaya in 1766–1767
Source: The National Memorial of Thailand

The establishment of the Rattanakosin period in 1782 marked another major phase in Thailand's historical development. King Rama I transferred the capital to the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya River and established Bangkok as the political and ceremonial centre of the new Chakri Dynasty. The Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, commonly known as Wat Phra Kaew, were founded as central institutions of the new capital. During the early Rattanakosin period, cultural and administrative traditions inherited from Ayutthaya were restored, codified, and adapted, contributing to the formation of modern Thai identity. Today, the Grand Palace, Wat Phra Kaew, and other royal and religious landmarks remain prominent

cultural symbols and important heritage tourism attractions (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; The Grand Palace, 2026).

Religion has remained central to Thailand's historical and cultural development. Theravada Buddhism has influenced moral values, artistic expression, education, social practices, and community life **(Figure 27)**. Buddhist temples have traditionally functioned not only as places of worship but also as centres of learning, cultural transmission, and community activity. The Epigraphic Archives of Wat Pho, for example, preserve 1,431 inscriptions covering religious and secular knowledge that were deliberately made accessible for public education during the nineteenth century. In contemporary tourism, temples, religious festivals, meditation practices, Buddhist art, and ritual traditions continue to provide important settings through which visitors encounter Thailand's living religious heritage (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; UNESCO, 2026).



Figure 27. Theravada Buddhism in Thailand
Source: Evelyn & Simko via trulilulitravelreports.com

An important characteristic of Thailand's historical development is the continuity between material heritage and living cultural practice. Historic places and religious monuments do not exist solely as remnants of the past but frequently remain connected to contemporary beliefs, rituals, community activities, and everyday life. Festivals, culinary traditions, craftsmanship, religious ceremonies, oral knowledge, and local customs continue to be practised, adapted, and transmitted across generations. This continuity reflects the concept of *living heritage*, in which cultural knowledge and practices remain meaningful because communities continue to recreate and

sustain them in response to changing social and environmental conditions (UNESCO, 2026).

Contemporary approaches also recognize that heritage extends beyond monuments, archaeological remains, and museum collections. It encompasses cultural landscapes, collective memories, traditional knowledge, social practices, and the relationships through which communities assign meaning to places. Tangible and intangible heritage should therefore be understood as interdependent: historic buildings and cultural objects derive meaning from the knowledge, practices, and narratives associated with them, while living traditions are often sustained through particular places, objects, and cultural environments. Tourism planning must consequently integrate the conservation of physical heritage with the safeguarding of living cultural practices and community-based meanings (ICOMOS, 2022).

Thailand's historical heritage can also contribute to the country's soft power and international reputation. Historic cities, Buddhist traditions, sacred places, artistic expressions, and cultural narratives provide international visitors with opportunities to encounter Thai history and identity through direct experience. When supported by meaningful interpretation and respectful engagement, heritage tourism can strengthen cultural familiarity, destination image, and appreciation of the country's historical and artistic achievements. Historical heritage therefore functions not only as a tourism resource but also as a potential platform for nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and tourism-related soft power (Casado Claro et al., 2023).

However, the growing popularity of heritage tourism also creates significant management challenges. Concentrated visitor flows may cause physical deterioration, crowding, inappropriate behaviour, commercial pressure, and disruption to the cultural and spiritual functions of heritage places **(Figure 28)**. Tourism development may also generate conflicts concerning access, representation, community rights, and the distribution of economic benefits. Sustainable heritage management therefore requires conservation monitoring, responsible visitor management, participatory governance, community involvement, and coordination between tourism development and heritage-protection objectives (ICOMOS, 2022; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Maintaining Thailand's historical resources for future generations consequently depends on treating heritage as a living and interconnected system rather than as a collection of marketable attractions. Effective management must protect physical sites while supporting the communities, knowledge holders, cultural practitioners, and social traditions that continue to give those sites meaning.



Figure 28. Concentrated Visitor Flows in Heritage Site
Source: bangkokpost.com

Thailand's historical foundations provide the essential context for understanding its cultural capital and tourism development. The country's historical evolution has produced a rich collection of tangible and intangible cultural resources that continue to influence contemporary society and attract international visitors. These historical assets contribute not only to tourism competitiveness but also to cultural identity, community resilience, and national soft power. Understanding these foundations is therefore critical for appreciating how Thailand has transformed its historical legacy into one of the world's most distinctive and successful tourism destinations.

3.2 Thai Cultural Identity

Thai cultural identity represents an important dimension of the country's cultural capital and provides a foundation for many tourism experiences, cultural expressions, and international perceptions. It should not, however, be understood as a fixed or homogeneous set of characteristics. Thai identity has developed through historical change, religious traditions, political transformation, regional interaction, migration, and cultural adaptation. Contemporary identity therefore reflects continuing negotiations between tradition and modernity, local and global influences, national narratives, and regional and social diversity (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; Reynolds, 2002).

Central to discussions of Thai identity is the concept of *khwam pen thai*, commonly translated as "Thainess". The term encompasses cultural values, symbols, practices, behaviours,

and narratives associated with being Thai, but it has never possessed a single or universally accepted meaning. Modern constructions of Thainess developed partly through processes of territorial consolidation, state formation, education, cultural policy, and nation-building during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thai identity should therefore be understood as both a lived cultural experience and a historically produced social and political construct that continues to change over time (Reynolds, 2002; Winichakul, 1994).

Theravada Buddhism has been one of the most enduring influences on Thai cultural life. Buddhist institutions and teachings have shaped ethical conduct, education, artistic production, ceremonial practices, social relationships, and community organization. Temples have historically served not only as places of worship but also as centres of learning, cultural transmission, and collective activity. At the same time, Thai religious life is diverse and has incorporated local beliefs, Brahmanical traditions, spirit practices, and influences from other religious communities. Buddhism should therefore be viewed as a major historical foundation of Thai identity rather than as its sole defining element (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; Jory, 2021).

Social conduct and interpersonal relationships also constitute important dimensions of Thai cultural identity. Concepts such as *kreng jai*—consideration for the feelings or position of others—*nam jai*—generosity or willingness to assist—and *sanuk*—the incorporation of enjoyment and positive engagement into social activity—are frequently used to interpret

patterns of Thai social interaction. These concepts may encourage courtesy, cooperation, and sensitivity to social relationships, but they should not be treated as fixed characteristics shared equally by all Thai people. Their meanings and expressions vary according to generation, region, social context, and individual experience (Jory, 2021).

Hospitality may be interpreted as a form of embodied cultural capital when social knowledge, manners, communication styles, and culturally informed service practices are expressed through interactions with visitors. Thailand's familiar representation as the *"Land of Smiles"* reflects a tourism narrative constructed through promotional communication, service encounters, and visitor interpretations of Thai social behaviour. Research in Thai five-star hotels indicates that service mannerisms, cultural atmosphere, cuisine, and cultural expression contribute to perceptions of Thainess, with staff mannerisms exerting a particularly strong influence on guest impressions (Vejjajiva et al., 2023).

Thai hospitality should nevertheless not be reduced to a commercial service characteristic or an assumed national personality. Manners and appropriate conduct in Thailand have been historically shaped and transmitted through families, religious institutions, court culture, education, government, and the media. Courtesy, smiling, and respectful behaviour are therefore better understood as context-dependent cultural practices than as automatic or universal qualities of every member of Thai society (Jory, 2021).

Respect for seniority, social position, teachers, religious practitioners, and other authority figures has also influenced Thai language, etiquette, ceremonies, and everyday interaction. One of the most visible expressions of these relationships is the *wai*, a gesture used in greeting, leave-taking, gratitude, apology, and the demonstration of respect. The form and height of the gesture may vary according to the relationship and social context of the participants. Widely recognized within tourism, the *wai* provides visitors with an accessible introduction to Thai conventions of courtesy and social recognition **(Figure 29)**. These practices illustrate how embodied cultural capital is communicated through bodily conduct, language, and interpersonal interaction (Jory, 2021).

Thai cultural identity therefore contributes to tourism not as a single standardized product but as a dynamic collection of histories, values, practices, regional traditions, and forms of social interaction. Heritage, Buddhism, cuisine, festivals, hospitality, language, etiquette, and everyday life provide visitors with multiple ways of encountering and interpreting Thainess. Responsible tourism management should preserve this complexity and avoid reducing Thai identity to a narrow set of stereotypes or marketable symbols.



Figure 29. *Wai* Gesture
Source: Dhammathai.org

Another important characteristic of Thai cultural identity is its capacity for adaptation and cultural synthesis. Throughout its history, the territory of present-day Thailand has interacted with Indian, Chinese, Khmer, Mon, Malay, Persian, European, and other Southeast Asian societies through trade, migration, religion, diplomacy, and political exchange. These influences were not merely copied but were selectively interpreted, localized, and combined with existing cultural practices. Thai identity has consequently developed through an ongoing process of cultural negotiation, enabling society to respond to modernization and globalization while retaining, adapting, and sometimes reinventing established traditions. Peleggi(2007)

specifically characterizes the Thai nation-state as the product of sustained interaction with the outside world rather than an isolated or culturally unchanged society.

Regional diversity further enriches Thai cultural identity. Although national narratives have often emphasized unity and a shared concept of Thainess, Thailand contains diverse regional, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and historical traditions. Northern Thailand retains cultural connections with the former Lanna kingdoms, expressed through local languages, architecture, cuisine, crafts, Buddhist practices, and festivals. Northeastern Thailand, commonly known as Isan, reflects strong but complex linguistic and cultural relationships with Laos, alongside Khmer, Kuy, Phu Thai, and other identities. Southern Thailand incorporates Malay-Muslim, Chinese, Thai Buddhist, and maritime cultural influences, while Central Thailand has been particularly shaped by court traditions, state institutions, river-based communities, and successive political capitals. These regions should not be regarded as internally homogeneous, as each contains considerable local and cultural diversity (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; McCargo & Hongladarom, 2004; Peleggi, 2007).

Regional identities represent important forms of cultural capital because they provide destinations with distinctive languages, cuisines, artistic traditions, festivals, crafts, stories, and ways of life. When interpreted respectfully, this diversity enables tourism destinations to develop experiences rooted in local character rather than presenting a standardized national culture. However, tourism development should avoid reducing

complex regional identities to simplified images or treating local traditions merely as commercial products.

Cuisine represents one of the most internationally recognizable expressions of Thai cultural identity. Thai food reflects regional agricultural systems, local ingredients, culinary knowledge, household traditions, social relationships, and long histories of cultural interaction. Food also communicates values associated with sharing, hospitality, creativity, family life, and community participation. It therefore operates simultaneously as living heritage, embodied cultural capital, a tourism attraction, and a resource for international cultural communication. The recognition of *Tomyum Kung* on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2024 further illustrates how culinary practices incorporate environmental knowledge, local ingredients, practical skills, and intergenerational cultural transmission (Chantanaroj, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Thai cuisine may also contribute to soft power by increasing familiarity with Thailand and encouraging international audiences to engage with its culture through restaurants, media, tourism, and everyday consumption. Its influence should nevertheless not be measured solely through the global popularity of selected dishes. Responsible gastronomy tourism should communicate the diversity of regional foodways, support local producers and culinary practitioners, and protect the knowledge and cultural meanings associated with food production and consumption (Chantanaroj, 2024).

Festivals and cultural celebrations similarly play an important role in expressing and transmitting Thai identity. Songkran **(Figure 30)**, Loi Krathong, and numerous regional celebrations connect religious beliefs, seasonal cycles, historical narratives, local environments, and community relationships. They create opportunities for ritual participation, family reunion, cultural learning, artistic expression, and intergenerational transmission. UNESCO's inscription of Songkran in 2023 recognizes its association with community cooperation, family relationships, respect for older adults and ancestors, merit-making, forgiveness, and hopes for prosperity in the coming year (UNESCO, 2023).

Loi Krathong **(Figure 31)** also illustrates the relationship between cultural practice, water environments, religious interpretation, local creativity, and regional variation. Although widely represented as a national festival, its forms and meanings differ among destinations. Northern traditions such as Yi Peng, for example, include distinctive Lanna practices associated with lanterns and Buddhist devotion. Festivals therefore function not only as tourism events but also as living cultural spaces through which communities reproduce, negotiate, and communicate identity (TAT, 2026).

As Thai festivals have gained international visibility, they have increasingly supported destination branding and cultural diplomacy. However, their tourism development requires careful management. Excessive commercialization, crowding, inappropriate behaviour, environmental damage, and the simplification of ritual meanings may weaken their cultural

significance. Festival tourism should therefore protect community participation, religious and cultural integrity, environmental responsibility, and the authority of local practitioners while providing meaningful opportunities for visitor engagement.



Figure 30. Songkran Festival
Source: my.trip.com



Figure 31. Loi Krathong Festival
Source: beyourguides.com

Globalization and digital transformation have introduced new dimensions to Thai cultural identity. Digital platforms, transnational media, education, international mobility, and global cultural industries have expanded the ways in which Thai creators and audiences encounter, interpret, and reproduce culture. These interactions do not necessarily result in cultural homogenization. Instead, they frequently generate hybrid expressions in which local narratives, aesthetics, beliefs, and traditions are reinterpreted through contemporary and transnational forms. Recent Thai literature, film, music, fashion, visual culture, and digital content illustrate how Thainess continues to be negotiated and creatively reconstructed within an interconnected cultural environment (Boonhok, 2025; UNESCO, 2023).

The relationship between Thai cultural identity and tourism is particularly significant because tourism provides an important platform through which culture is selected, interpreted, performed, and communicated. Visitors encounter different expressions of Thai identity through heritage places, religious traditions, festivals, cuisine, crafts, hospitality, community lifestyles, contemporary culture, and everyday social interaction. These encounters influence perceptions of authenticity, distinctiveness, and place while contributing to destination-image formation. Research in northern Thailand further demonstrates that locally grounded cultural identity and community participation can support the development of meaningful and sustainable cultural tourism experiences (Kanoksilapatham et al., 2023; Richards, 2021).

Thai cultural identity consequently functions not only as a social and cultural phenomenon but also as a strategic tourism resource. Its regional traditions, living heritage, creative practices, and interpersonal expressions allow destinations to differentiate themselves and provide visitors with experiences that cannot be understood solely through physical attractions. However, tourism does not merely transmit an existing identity unchanged. Visitor expectations, promotional campaigns, commercial interests, media representations, and community responses may also reshape the ways in which Thai identity is presented and understood.

The commercialization of culture therefore presents important management challenges. Tourism development may encourage complex identities and cultural traditions to be reduced to standardized images, staged performances, or easily marketable symbols. Commercialization is not inherently harmful, as tourism revenue can support cultural practitioners, local enterprises, conservation, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. Nevertheless, excessive commercialization can weaken perceived authenticity, reduce cultural practices to superficial consumption, and distance tourism representations from the communities that give them meaning. Recent evidence indicates that highly commercialized heritage experiences may reduce visitor satisfaction and loyalty when commercialization diminishes both object-based and existential authenticity (Cao et al., 2025).

Sustainable tourism management should therefore ensure that representations of Thai identity remain culturally grounded,

inclusive, and responsive to contemporary realities. Cultural practitioners and local communities should participate in deciding which traditions are presented, how cultural meanings are interpreted, and how economic and social benefits are distributed. Such participation is particularly important because Thai identity contains regional, ethnic, religious, generational, and social differences that cannot be adequately represented through a single standardized narrative of Thainess. Cultural-tourism policies should consequently balance visitor accessibility and destination marketing with cultural integrity, community authority, and respect for diversity (Kanoksilapatham et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021).

Thai cultural identity represents one of the country's most valuable forms of cultural capital. It shapes social relationships, informs tourism experiences, differentiates destinations, and contributes to Thailand's cultural visibility and international reputation. Its value lies not in presenting Thai culture as timeless or uniform but in demonstrating its capacity for continuity, adaptation, creativity, and dialogue. Through tourism, cultural identity may contribute to destination branding and soft power by generating familiarity, attraction, and appreciation among international audiences; however, such influence depends on credible cultural representation and meaningful engagement rather than promotional visibility alone (Dinnie, 2022; Nye, 2021; Richards, 2021).

Understanding Thai cultural identity is therefore essential for explaining Thailand's position as a cultural tourism destination. Thai identity should be approached as a living and

evolving resource that can generate economic, social, cultural, experiential, and symbolic value while remaining subject to negotiation and change. Responsible tourism management must preserve this dynamism by supporting cultural diversity, community participation, creative expression, and the continued transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

3.3 Tangible Cultural Capital

Tangible cultural capital refers to the physical expressions of culture that embody historical, artistic, architectural, religious, and social significance **(Figure 32)**. These resources include archaeological sites, historic buildings, monuments, temples, palaces, museums, artworks, artefacts, manuscripts, cultural landscapes, and traditional settlements. They represent accumulated cultural assets through which societies preserve knowledge, communicate collective memory, and express cultural identity across generations.

Within Bourdieu's (1986) framework, tangible cultural capital is closely associated with *objectified cultural capital*, which refers to cultural value embodied in material objects and works. However, tangible cultural capital at the destination level extends beyond individually owned cultural goods. It also encompasses collectively valued heritage places, public monuments, sacred environments, and cultural landscapes whose meanings depend on historical narratives, community practices, institutional recognition, and social interpretation. The cultural value of these resources therefore arises not only from their physical existence but also from the knowledge, traditions,

memories, and symbolic meanings associated with them (Throsby, 2001).

In tourism, tangible cultural capital is frequently the most visible and recognizable dimension of a destination's cultural-resource base. Historic cities, religious monuments, archaeological remains, vernacular architecture, museums, and cultural landscapes provide settings in which visitors can encounter and interpret the history and identity of a place. Through conservation, interpretation, storytelling, and experience design, these material resources may generate educational, economic, social, experiential, and symbolic value. They can also strengthen place identity, destination differentiation, heritage tourism, and international recognition (OECD, 2022; Richards, 2021).

Nevertheless, tangible cultural capital should not be treated merely as a collection of marketable attractions. Its long-term tourism value depends on conservation, cultural integrity, appropriate interpretation, community participation, and responsible visitor management. Physical heritage may deteriorate through environmental change, insufficient maintenance, inappropriate development, excessive visitation, or commercialization. Effective tourism management must therefore balance public access and economic use with the responsibility to safeguard material heritage and its associated cultural meanings for future generations.



Figure 32. Thai Cultures and Traditions
Source: theluxurysignature.com

Thailand possesses an exceptionally rich stock of tangible cultural capital derived from centuries of historical development, religious traditions, artistic achievements, and cultural exchange. Historical cities, temples, palaces, archaeological sites, museums, traditional architecture, cultural landscapes, and heritage districts collectively contribute to the country's tourism attractiveness and international reputation. These resources not only attract visitors but also communicate narratives of national identity, cultural continuity, and historical achievement.

3.3.1 Tangible Cultural Capital as a Tourism Resource

Tangible cultural capital constitutes one of the most visible and widely recognized dimensions of cultural tourism. It encompasses physical expressions of culture, including historic monuments, archaeological sites, religious buildings, museums, traditional architecture, heritage districts, cultural landscapes, artworks, and material artefacts that embody the historical and cultural development of societies. These resources represent accumulated cultural value and collective memory, providing destinations with distinctive assets that contribute to cultural identity, tourism attractiveness, education, and place differentiation (ICOMOS, 2022; Throsby, 2001).

The significance of tangible cultural capital lies partly in its capacity to connect visitors with the material and historical dimensions of a culture. Through direct encounters with monuments, museums, sacred places, historic settlements, and cultural landscapes, visitors can develop a greater understanding of historical events, social change, artistic achievement, religious traditions, and everyday life. However, the educational and experiential value of these resources does not emerge from physical structures alone. It depends on interpretation, storytelling, cultural knowledge, and the meanings assigned to heritage by communities, practitioners, and institutions. Tangible cultural capital therefore functions not only as a tourism attraction but also as a medium through which cultural knowledge, collective memory, and place-based identity are communicated across generations (ICOMOS, 2022; Richards, 2021).

From a destination-management perspective, tangible cultural capital can support competitive advantage because heritage resources are closely embedded in particular histories, environments, cultural practices, and communities. Tourism facilities and services may be reproduced in different locations, whereas the cultural meanings and historical associations attached to heritage places are more difficult to reproduce authentically. Such place-specific qualities strengthen destination differentiation, provide foundations for distinctive tourism narratives, and contribute to place identity and destination branding (OECD, 2022; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Northern Thai architecture, commonly associated with Lanna cultural traditions, provides an example of tangible cultural capital through which regional history, religious influences, craftsmanship, and aesthetic identity are expressed **(Figure 33)**.

Nevertheless, tangible cultural resources cannot generate lasting tourism value without appropriate conservation and management. Physical deterioration, inappropriate development, environmental change, overcrowding, and excessive commercialization may undermine both the material integrity and cultural significance of heritage places. Sustainable tourism management must therefore balance visitor access and economic use with conservation, accurate interpretation, community participation, and respect for the cultural values associated with each site (ICOMOS, 2022).



Figure 33. Thai Northern Architecture
Source: sanook.com

In addition to their tourism value, tangible cultural resources generate broader social and economic benefits. Heritage conservation initiatives often stimulate local employment, attract investment, support small businesses, and encourage urban regeneration. At the same time, the preservation of historical sites contributes to community identity, collective memory, and cultural continuity. Contemporary heritage management therefore increasingly recognizes tangible cultural capital as both a cultural resource and a strategic asset capable of supporting sustainable tourism development and place-based economic growth.

3.3.2 Historical Cities as Cultural Capital

Among Thailand's most significant forms of tangible cultural capital are its historic cities. These urban heritage landscapes embody successive periods of political authority, economic development, religious practice, artistic production, technological innovation, and cultural exchange. Their value extends beyond individual monuments because the spatial relationships among temples, palaces, waterways, roads, residential areas, and archaeological remains communicate how earlier societies were organized. Historic cities therefore function simultaneously as repositories of collective memory, settings for cultural education, and distinctive resources for heritage tourism and place identity.

The Historic City of Ayutthaya **(Figure 34)** represents one of Thailand's most important tangible heritage assets. Founded around 1350, Ayutthaya served as the second capital of the Siamese Kingdom after Sukhothai and flourished from the

fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Its strategic location on an island surrounded by three rivers connected the city to regional and international maritime networks, enabling it to develop into a major centre of commerce, diplomacy, religion, and cultural interaction. At its height, Ayutthaya was among the largest and most cosmopolitan urban centres of its period, accommodating traders, diplomats, missionaries, and residents from different parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Following the destruction of the city in 1767, Ayutthaya was not reconstructed in its original location. Its surviving archaeological landscape includes monumental Buddhist monasteries, *prang* or reliquary towers, palace remains, sculptures, roads, canals, moats, and evidence of an advanced water-management system. These material remains provide insight into the political authority, economic prosperity, artistic creativity, technological knowledge, and cultural diversity of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1991, the historic city continues to function as a major heritage-tourism destination and an important symbol of Thailand's historical identity and cultural continuity (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

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Figure 34. The Historic City of Ayutthaya
Source: th.trip.com and Janik via vecteezy.com

Similarly, the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns preserves the material remains of one of the earliest major Siamese political and cultural centres. The World Heritage property comprises Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, and Kamphaeng Phet, which collectively reflect the administrative, religious, artistic, economic, and technological development of the Sukhothai Kingdom. Their temples, sculptures, inscriptions, roads, reservoirs, canals, and urban landscapes illustrate the emergence of the distinctive "Sukhothai style" and provide evidence of early developments in Thai architecture, writing, religion, governance, law, and water management. Wat Mahathat, the principal religious complex within Sukhothai Historical Park, exemplifies the monumental architecture and Buddhist artistic traditions associated with this period **(Figure 35)** (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Sukhothai also holds considerable symbolic importance within Thai cultural memory and national historical narratives. Its monuments and archaeological landscapes have been interpreted as material representations of early Siamese state formation, artistic achievement, Buddhist patronage, and cultural identity. Consequently, Sukhothai functions not only as a heritage tourism destination but also as a culturally significant landscape through which historical memory is preserved, interpreted, and institutionalized. Together with Ayutthaya, it demonstrates how historic cities can operate simultaneously as tourism resources, internationally recognized heritage properties, and symbols of national cultural continuity (Peleggi, 2017; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

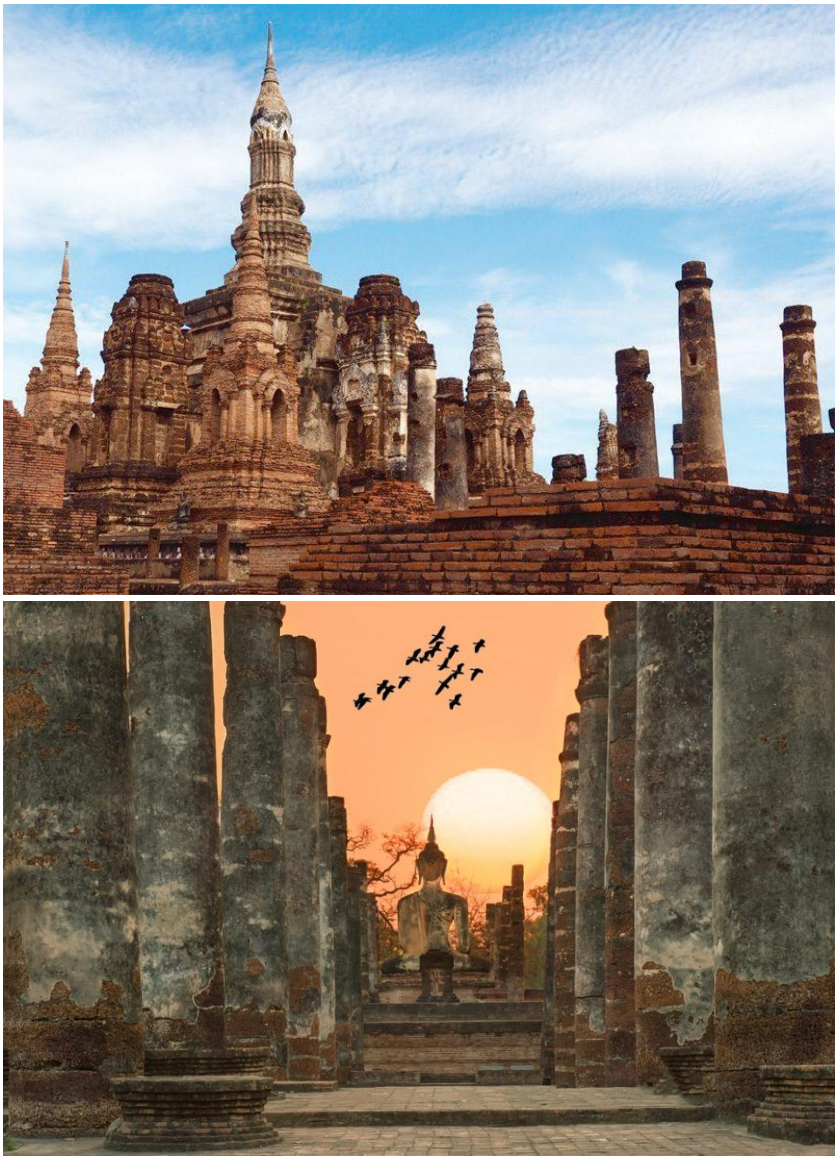


Figure 35. Mahathat Temple, Sukhothai
Source: blog.bangkokair.com

3.3.3 Buddhist Temples and Religious Architecture

Buddhist temples constitute one of the most significant categories of Thailand's tangible cultural capital. As Theravada Buddhism has influenced Thai society for centuries, an extensive network of temples has developed across the country, ranging from community monasteries to royal and nationally significant religious complexes. Temples function not only as places of worship but also as centres of merit-making, education, artistic production, community activity, and cultural transmission. Their architectural compounds frequently include ordination halls, assembly halls, *chedi*, *prang*, cloisters, libraries, gateways, murals, sculptures, and other material expressions of Buddhist belief and Thai craftsmanship (National Office of Buddhism, 2026).

Among the most prominent examples are Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Pho **(Figure 36)**, Wat Arun **(Figure 37)**, and Wat Phra That Doi Suthep **(Figure 38)**. Wat Phra Kaew, formally known as Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram, serves as the royal chapel within the Grand Palace and houses the Emerald Buddha. Unlike a conventional monastery, it has no residential quarters for monks. Wat Pho is distinguished by its religious architecture, monumental Reclining Buddha, traditional knowledge, and epigraphic archives. UNESCO recognizes its collection of 1,431 stone inscriptions, produced between 1831 and 1841 and addressing both religious and secular knowledge, as part of the Memory of the World International Register (Bureau of the Royal Household, 2026; UNESCO, 2026).

Wat Arun is particularly recognized for its monumental central *prang*, decorative craftsmanship, and prominent riverside setting, which together make it one of Bangkok's most distinctive architectural landmarks. Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, situated above Chiang Mai, represents an important religious and cultural landmark associated with Lanna history, pilgrimage, regional identity, and northern Thai Buddhist architecture. These temples demonstrate how religious buildings can embody multiple forms of value, including sacred significance, architectural achievement, artistic knowledge, historical memory, symbolic recognition, and tourism appeal (TAT, 2026; TAT, 2026).

The cultural significance of Thai temples extends beyond their physical structures. Many contain murals, Buddha images, relics, manuscripts, inscriptions, ceremonial objects, and artistic traditions whose meanings are sustained through continuing religious practices. They should therefore be understood as living sacred environments in which tangible architecture and intangible heritage remain closely interconnected. Visitors may encounter these places as architectural attractions, while worshippers, monks, and local communities continue to engage with them as active religious and social institutions.

Tourism management must consequently avoid treating temples solely as visual attractions or commercial tourism products. Responsible management should protect their sacred functions, conserve architectural and artistic resources, support accurate cultural interpretation, and encourage respectful visitor behaviour. It should also consider dress codes, photography, noise, crowding, access to ritual spaces, and the needs of

religious communities. Balancing visitor experiences with worship, conservation, and community authority is essential for maintaining the cultural integrity and long-term value of Thailand's religious heritage (ICOMOS, 2022).



Figure 36. Wat Pho
Source: ibisstylesbangkoksilom.com and themomentum.co



Figure 37. Wat Arun
Source: wat-arun.com



Figure 38. Wat Phra That Doi Suthep
Source: tripsavvy.com and blog.bangkokair.com

From a tourism perspective, Buddhist temples provide important settings for cultural learning, spiritual reflection, pilgrimage, architectural appreciation, and respectful visual engagement. Through interpretation and direct encounters with sacred spaces, visitors can develop a deeper understanding of Thai history, Buddhist beliefs, artistic traditions, and community values. These experiences also contribute to Thailand's international image as a destination associated with spirituality, cultural richness, and historical continuity. However, tourism activities must remain compatible with the sacred functions of temples and respect the needs of monks, worshippers, and local communities

3.3.4 Royal Heritage and Palaces

Thailand's royal heritage represents an important dimension of its tangible cultural capital. The monarchy has played a central role in the country's political development, religious patronage, artistic production, architectural traditions, and construction of national identity. Royal palaces, throne halls, ceremonial spaces, temples, gardens, collections, and former residences consequently provide material evidence of changing systems of governance, court culture, craftsmanship, and international interaction. These sites function not only as historical monuments but also as cultural institutions through which narratives of statehood, legitimacy, and historical continuity are communicated (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022).

The Grand Palace in Bangkok is the most prominent expression of Thailand's royal heritage and one of the country's

major cultural attractions **(Figure 39)**. Constructed following the establishment of Bangkok as the new capital in 1782, the complex originally incorporated royal residences, throne halls, administrative buildings, and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, which functions as the Chapel Royal. Its spatial organization drew upon palace traditions from earlier Siamese capitals while establishing the ceremonial and administrative centre of the Rattanakosin Kingdom (Bureau of the Royal Household, 2026).

The cultural importance of the Grand Palace extends beyond its architectural form. The complex embodies royal patronage of Buddhism, decorative arts, mural painting, sculpture, architecture, and traditional craftsmanship. It remains a highly visible representation of Thailand's political and cultural history and attracts millions of visitors annually. Through its ceremonial spaces, sacred objects, artistic collections, and historical narratives, the palace communicates national heritage to both domestic and international audiences (UNESCO, 2023).

Other royal heritage sites, including former capitals, provincial palaces, royal residences, and summer retreats, further demonstrate the historical development of Thai architecture and court culture. Their designs often combine traditional Thai forms with Chinese, European, and other international influences, reflecting changing diplomatic relationships, technologies, lifestyles, and aesthetic preferences. Collectively, these places strengthen cultural tourism by expanding public understanding of Thailand's political history, artistic development, and cultural adaptation.

Royal heritage tourism nevertheless requires sensitive management because many sites retain ceremonial, sacred, institutional, or symbolic functions. Visitor access must therefore be balanced with conservation requirements, appropriate dress and behaviour, accurate historical interpretation, and respect for the cultural significance of royal spaces. Such management enables royal heritage sites to remain meaningful cultural resources rather than being reduced solely to visual attractions.





Figure 39. The Grand Palace of Thailand
Source: tourismthailand.org and palacebangkok.wordpress.com

3.3.5 Museums and Cultural Institutions

Museums constitute important repositories of tangible cultural capital because they collect, conserve, research, interpret, and communicate cultural heritage. Their collections enable visitors to engage with archaeological discoveries, historical objects, artistic traditions, religious artefacts, manuscripts, crafts, and cultural narratives within structured educational environments. Contemporary museum practice also recognizes that material collections are closely connected to intangible knowledge, community memories, cultural identities, and living traditions. Museums therefore function not only as places for displaying objects but also as institutions supporting education, reflection, knowledge sharing, cultural participation, and heritage continuity (ICOM, 2022).

Thailand's museum sector includes national museums, regional and local museums, specialized cultural institutions, university museums, private collections, and community-based museums. The *National Museum Bangkok* provides a prominent example **(Figure 40)**, preserving and presenting archaeological objects, religious art, royal collections, inscriptions, manuscripts, and works representing different periods of Thai history. Its development from royal collections into a public museum reflects the broader institutionalization of heritage preservation and public cultural education in Thailand (Fine Arts Department, 2026).

Museums contribute to tourism by providing accessible contexts through which visitors can interpret the historical and cultural significance of objects that may otherwise appear disconnected from their original settings. Curatorial narratives,

exhibitions, guided interpretation, educational programmes, and community participation can transform museum collections into meaningful tourism experiences. Museums may consequently strengthen destination identity, extend visitor stays, diversify cultural-tourism products, and encourage greater understanding of regional and national heritage.

Digital transformation is further expanding the role of museums in tourism and cultural communication. Virtual exhibitions, digitized collections, interactive displays, augmented and virtual reality, multilingual applications, digital storytelling, and participatory media can improve access to collections and create more personalized forms of visitor engagement. Such technologies also enable museums to reach audiences who cannot visit physically and may support documentation and the long-term transmission of cultural knowledge. However, digital innovation should complement rather than replace authentic encounters with collections, curators, cultural practitioners, and communities. It also requires careful attention to accessibility, intellectual property, cultural sensitivity, community rights, and the ethical use of digital content (ICOM, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). Museums should therefore be understood as active cultural institutions rather than passive storage facilities. Their contribution to tourism depends on professional conservation, accurate interpretation, inclusive representation, community participation, and the capacity to connect historical collections with contemporary social concerns. When appropriately managed, museums can preserve tangible cultural capital while generating educational, experiential, social, symbolic, and tourism value.

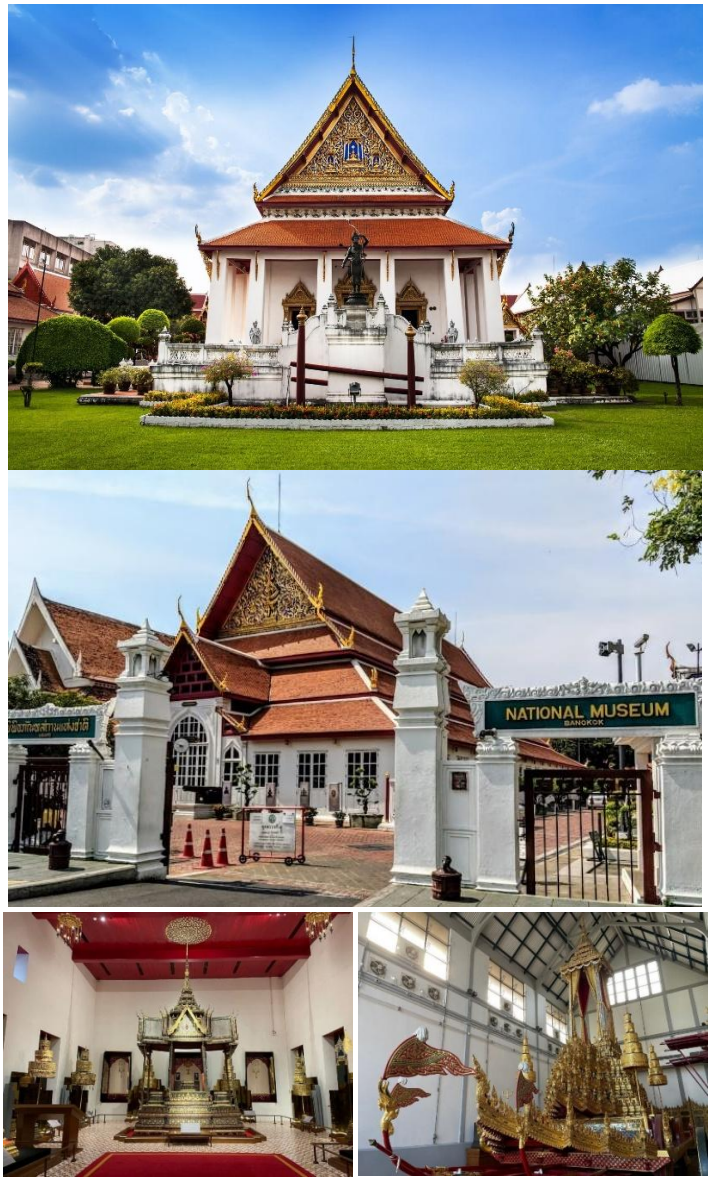


Figure 40. National Museum Bangkok, Thailand
Source: am2026thailand.go.th and thestupidbear.com

3.3.6 Cultural Landscapes and Heritage Districts

Tangible cultural capital extends beyond individual monuments and buildings to encompass broader cultural landscapes, historic districts, and urban heritage environments. UNESCO defines cultural landscapes as cultural properties representing the combined works of nature and humanity, reflecting the long-term interaction between societies and their environments. Such landscapes may reveal how settlement patterns, livelihoods, beliefs, technologies, and cultural practices have developed in response to both environmental conditions and social change (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Within urban contexts, heritage value is embedded not only in prominent buildings but also in street patterns, waterways, public spaces, residential neighbourhoods, traditional land uses, and relationships among people and place. UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape approach therefore moves beyond the conservation of isolated structures to consider the wider physical, social, cultural, and economic environment of historic cities. This perspective is particularly relevant to living heritage districts where traditional architecture coexists with contemporary businesses, religious practices, community activities, and everyday urban life (UNESCO, 2011).

In Thailand, such environments include historic urban districts, agricultural landscapes, riverine settlements, sacred mountains, and traditional communities. Bangkok's Rattanakosin Island, Phuket Old Town, and Chiang Mai Old City illustrate how architecture, urban planning, religious sites, commercial history, public spaces, and community life collectively contribute

to destination identity. Rattanakosin Island expresses the political, religious, and ceremonial foundations of the Bangkok era through its palaces, temples, canals, fortifications, and historic neighbourhoods. Chiang Mai Old City similarly preserves elements of Lanna urban form through its moat, surviving walls and gates, temples, streets, and cultural institutions.

Phuket Old Town provides a particularly distinctive example of an urban heritage environment shaped by maritime trade, migration, and multicultural interaction **(Figure 41)**. Its historic streets contain shophouses, religious buildings, markets, family businesses, and architectural forms influenced by Chinese and European traditions. The district's cultural significance is reinforced by living practices associated with food, clothing, religious observance, festivals, and local entrepreneurship. It therefore demonstrates how tangible architecture and intangible cultural traditions can combine to create a place-based tourism experience (TAT, 2025).

Heritage districts offer visitors opportunities to experience culture through walking routes, architecture, museums, temples, markets, cuisine, crafts, festivals, and interaction with local communities. Their tourism value emerges from the relationship among buildings, public spaces, cultural practices, and resident life rather than from any single attraction. These environments can strengthen destination differentiation and encourage visitors to understand how historical processes continue to influence contemporary places.

However, living heritage districts should not be managed as static open-air museums. Uncontrolled tourism development, inappropriate construction, traffic congestion, commercialization, rising property values, and the displacement of residents or traditional businesses can weaken their cultural character. Sustainable management therefore requires integrated conservation planning, community participation, sensitive adaptive reuse, visitor-flow management, and the protection of both physical heritage and local ways of life. Maintaining these relationships is essential if cultural landscapes and heritage districts are to remain socially meaningful, economically viable, and culturally distinctive (ICOMOS, 2022; UNESCO, 2011).



Figure 41. Phuket Old Town
Source: pullmanphuketpanwa.com

3.3.7 Economic and Tourism Value of Tangible Cultural Capital

Tangible cultural capital can generate substantial economic and tourism value. Heritage sites and districts stimulate direct expenditure through admission fees, guided tours, accommodation, transportation, food services, retail purchases, and cultural activities. They may also generate indirect benefits by creating demand for local suppliers, craftspeople, conservation professionals, performers, food producers, and creative businesses. Major heritage resources can therefore function as anchor attractions around which wider tourism services and destination itineraries are developed (OECD, 2022).

Museums, historic sites, and cultural districts can support local development by attracting visitors, generating revenue, encouraging investment, revitalizing urban areas, and reinforcing territorial identity. Heritage tourism may also provide opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises, including locally owned accommodation, restaurants, craft businesses, cultural interpretation services, and community-based tourism initiatives. These relationships can create multiplier effects when tourism expenditure circulates through local supply chains rather than leaving the destination (OECD, 2022, 2026).

The conversion of tangible cultural capital into economic value is not automatic or equally beneficial to all stakeholders. Its contribution depends on ownership structures, local business participation, employment conditions, seasonality, tourism leakage, accessibility, conservation expenditure, and the

distribution of benefits. High visitor numbers may generate income while simultaneously increasing maintenance costs, congestion, environmental pressure, and disruption to residents. Economic performance should therefore be evaluated alongside cultural integrity, community well-being, conservation outcomes, and the long-term resilience of the destination (ICOMOS, 2022; OECD, 2026).

In Thailand, historic cities, Buddhist temples, royal palaces, museums, archaeological sites, and heritage districts remain prominent components of cultural tourism and destination image. Their value extends beyond expenditure at individual attractions because they also support hospitality services, cultural industries, local products, transportation, interpretation, and community enterprises. Cooperation between UNESCO and Thailand's Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration has similarly emphasized connecting heritage safeguarding with sustainable tourism, capacity development, and local economic development (United Nations in Thailand, 2023).

However, the successful conversion of cultural capital into economic capital must include reinvestment in conservation, interpretation, infrastructure, practitioner development, and community benefits. When tourism revenue is separated from heritage protection, economic use may gradually weaken the cultural resources on which tourism depends. Sustainable heritage tourism therefore requires a circular relationship in which tourism generates value from tangible cultural capital

while returning sufficient resources and institutional support to maintain, restore, and transmit that capital to future generations.

3.3.8 Challenges in Managing Tangible Cultural Capital

Despite its considerable economic, historical, and symbolic value, tangible cultural capital is increasingly exposed to interconnected environmental, social, financial, and managerial pressures. Rapid urbanization, inappropriate infrastructure development, pollution, climate change, extreme weather events, overtourism, insufficient conservation funding, and limited technical capacity can accelerate the deterioration of historic buildings, archaeological sites, cultural landscapes, and monuments. The 2023 *Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage* emphasizes that climate-related risks must be incorporated into heritage management, monitoring, disaster preparedness, adaptation, and long-term conservation planning (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023). Recent research similarly identifies limited financial resources, shortages of skilled personnel, inappropriate user behaviour, administrative complexity, and inadequate community participation as major barriers to the effective conservation of cultural heritage in developing-country contexts (Thuc et al., 2024).

Tourism presents a particular management challenge because it can simultaneously generate revenue for conservation and contribute to the physical and environmental deterioration of heritage sites. Excessive visitor concentration may cause surface abrasion, structural stress, congestion, waste accumulation,

unauthorized access, and disruption to the character and atmosphere of culturally significant places **(Figure 42)**. Overtourism may also reduce the quality of life of local residents and gradually weaken the social and cultural qualities that make heritage destinations distinctive (Gocer et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024). Consequently, heritage managers should establish appropriate carrying capacities, monitor visitor flows, regulate access to vulnerable areas, distribute tourists across different locations and time periods, and reinvest tourism revenue in conservation and site maintenance.



Figure 42. Environmental Degradation
Source: greennews.agency

In Thailand, these challenges are particularly relevant to archaeological parks, historic towns, religious monuments, vernacular settlements, and cultural landscapes that must accommodate tourism while maintaining their authenticity, integrity, and cultural significance. The management of newly recognized heritage sites illustrates the importance of preparing for increased public attention and visitor demand. For example, when the Ancient Town of Si Thep and its Associated Dvaravati Monuments was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the World Heritage Committee recommended that Thailand prioritize a comprehensive management plan incorporating sustainable tourism, risk management, heritage impact assessment, systematic monitoring, and inclusive community engagement (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2023). These recommendations demonstrate that infrastructure and visitor facilities should not be developed independently of conservation objectives or without assessing their potential effects on heritage values.

Evidence from Sukhothai Historical Park also indicates that sustainable heritage management can generate positive economic, social, and cultural outcomes; however, meaningful participation by local communities and stakeholders remains essential throughout planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation processes (Esichaikul & Chansawang, 2022). Heritage management should therefore move beyond consultation conducted only after decisions have been made and instead adopt co-designed approaches that allow communities to influence how cultural resources are protected, interpreted, presented, and used for tourism.

Contemporary conservation approaches increasingly recognize that the management of tangible cultural capital should extend beyond preserving physical structures and materials. Historic buildings, monuments, and landscapes derive much of their significance from the traditions, memories, knowledge, religious practices, livelihoods, and cultural meanings associated with them. Research suggests that active community participation can strengthen cultural knowledge, awareness, local ownership, and support for long-term heritage conservation (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023). Tangible cultural capital should therefore be managed as part of a living cultural system in which physical preservation, cultural continuity, community well-being, and social relevance are mutually reinforcing. Effective management ultimately requires an integrated approach that combines scientific conservation, climate resilience, responsible visitor management, adequate financing, heritage education, community participation, and continuous monitoring.

3.3.9 Tangible Cultural Capital and Soft Power

Tangible cultural capital contributes significantly to Thailand's soft power by providing visible and enduring representations of the country's history, artistic achievements, religious traditions, and cultural identity. Historical monuments, temples, archaeological sites, heritage cities, museums, traditional architecture, and cultural landscapes communicate narratives about Thailand to international audiences. Unlike promotional messages that may be temporary, physical heritage provides visitors with direct encounters with the country's

historical development and cultural values. Cultural heritage can therefore support international cultural relations by transmitting values, constructing narratives of historical connection, and shaping collective identities and perceptions of place (Čeginskas & Lähdesmäki, 2023; Winter, 2023).

Heritage tourism strengthens this process by allowing international visitors to experience Thailand's cultural identity through physical places, architectural forms, museum collections, religious spaces, and cultural landscapes. Empirical research indicates that distinctive heritage resources can make a stronger contribution to destination image than tourism resources that can be easily replicated by competing destinations (Ndubisi & Nair, 2023). Moreover, the effectiveness of tangible heritage as a form of cultural communication depends not only on the existence of monuments and historic places but also on how their meanings are interpreted. Historical storytelling, knowledgeable guides, and authentic settings can enhance visitors' educational, experiential, emotional, and entertainment value, thereby strengthening their engagement with cultural destinations (Leong et al., 2024).

Thailand possesses a diverse portfolio of internationally recognized cultural heritage, including the Historic City of Ayutthaya, the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns, the Ban Chiang Archaeological Site, the Ancient Town of Si Thep and its Associated Dvaravati Monuments, and Phu Phrabat. The inscription of Si Thep in 2023 and Phu Phrabat in 2024 has expanded the international visibility of Thailand's pre-modern civilizations, religious diversity, archaeological

knowledge, and regional cultural landscapes. Phu Phrabat, for example, preserves the world's largest collection of *Sīma* stones situated in their original locations and represents an exceptional testimony to Buddhist sacred-boundary traditions associated with the Dvaravati period (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

The international recognition of such sites can enhance national prestige while supporting the diversification of tourism beyond established destinations. The Tourism Authority of Thailand has explicitly connected the recognition of Phu Phrabat with the development of cultural tourism experiences in northeastern Thailand and has incorporated cultural heritage into its international soft-power and sustainable-tourism promotion. At the World Travel Market 2024, for instance, Thailand presented its heritage, traditional crafts, textiles, local knowledge, and cultural experiences under the theme "Ignite Thailand: Soft Power and Sustainability" (TAT, 2024, TAT 2024). These initiatives demonstrate how tangible heritage can be integrated with tourism marketing to increase national visibility, differentiate Thailand from competing destinations, and encourage international interest in the country's regions and cultural traditions.

However, tangible cultural capital does not automatically generate soft power simply because a country possesses historically important places. Soft power depends on whether international audiences perceive the cultural narratives being communicated as attractive, authentic, credible, and meaningful. Heritage diplomacy may be employed by governments to

support foreign policy and international influence, but its outcomes are also shaped by heritage professionals, communities, tourism businesses, visitors, international organizations, and digital media platforms (Čeginskas & Lähdesmäki, 2023; Winter, 2023). Thailand must therefore present its physical heritage through accurate historical interpretation, inclusive narratives, multilingual communication, high-quality visitor experiences, and responsible digital storytelling rather than relying solely on iconic images of temples and monuments.

3.4 Intangible Cultural Capital

While tangible cultural capital represents culture through monuments, architecture, and physical heritage, much of a destination's cultural richness exists in intangible forms. Intangible cultural capital refers to living expressions, knowledge systems, social practices, beliefs, skills, and cultural competencies transmitted across generations. It is embedded in human knowledge, collective memory, cultural practices, and social relationships. Unlike physical heritage, it is dynamic and continuously recreated by communities in response to social and environmental changes.

The concept is closely associated with UNESCO's framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which recognizes practices, knowledge, and expressions that communities identify as part of their cultural identity. Its principal domains include oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge concerning

nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2026). Safeguarding these living traditions contributes to cultural continuity, diversity, community identity, and the transmission of knowledge to future generations.

In tourism, intangible cultural capital enables visitors to move beyond physical sightseeing by participating in traditions, interacting with local communities, observing performances, and learning culturally significant practices. Such engagement can create distinctive and meaningful experiences that are difficult for competing destinations to reproduce. Recent studies indicate that ritualized cultural experiences can strengthen tourist engagement, while perceived authenticity and active participation can positively influence destination image and visitor loyalty (Yan et al., 2024; Zuo et al., 2024).

3.4.1 Intangible Cultural Capital and Tourism Transformation

The growing importance of intangible cultural capital reflects broader changes in tourist behaviour. Traditional cultural tourism primarily focused on visiting monuments, museums, and historical sites, whereas contemporary tourists increasingly seek immersive and participatory experiences that enable direct engagement with local cultures. This transformation has increased the tourism significance of festivals, gastronomy, storytelling, performing arts, traditional lifestyles, and community-based activities. Research on intangible cultural heritage tourism indicates that culturally embedded and ritualized experiences can strengthen visitors' emotional

connection, self-identification, and engagement with destinations (Yan et al., 2024).

Unlike physical heritage, which can often be observed from a distance, intangible cultural capital generally requires interaction and active participation. Tourists who learn traditional crafts, participate in culinary activities, attend festivals and performances, or interact with local communities become co-creators rather than passive observers. Co-created tourism experiences combine dimensions such as immersion, authenticity, education, interaction, novelty, and uniqueness, which can enhance visitor satisfaction and destination competitiveness (Deng et al., 2024). When appropriately managed, these activities can also create income opportunities for cultural practitioners and local communities while supporting the continued transmission of cultural knowledge.

3.4.2 Festivals and Cultural Celebrations

Festivals represent one of the most visible forms of intangible cultural capital in Thailand. They express collective identity, religious beliefs, social values, and community traditions while also serving as tourism attractions that contribute to destination image and cultural soft power. When managed authentically, cultural festivals can strengthen local identity, community well-being, and the social sustainability of host destinations (Le et al., 2024).

Among Thailand's most internationally recognized celebrations is Songkran, the traditional Thai New Year festival. Rooted in Buddhist and community traditions, Songkran combines merit-making, family reunions, respect for elders, and

the symbolic use of water for cleansing and renewal. Although contemporary celebrations increasingly include entertainment and commercial activities, maintaining a balance between cultural rituals and recreational experiences is essential to prevent the distortion of cultural meanings (Intason, 2024). In 2023, UNESCO inscribed Songkran on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, enhancing its international recognition and cultural significance (UNESCO, 2023).

Similarly, Loi Krathong reflects the relationship between Thai communities, waterways, spirituality, and gratitude toward nature. Participants float decorated krathongs on rivers and canals as symbolic acts of respect, forgiveness, and renewal. The festival demonstrates how traditional beliefs can function simultaneously as cultural practices, community celebrations, and tourism experiences (TAT, 2026).

Beyond these nationally recognized festivals, Thailand hosts numerous regional and local celebrations associated with religious traditions, agriculture, ethnic identities, and community histories. These events provide visitors with opportunities to experience cultural diversity while generating income for local businesses, performers, artisans, and cultural practitioners. Their long-term tourism value, however, depends on meaningful community participation and the preservation of cultural authenticity.

3.4.3 Performing Arts and Cultural Expression

Performing arts constitute another important category of intangible cultural capital. Traditional dance, music, theatre, storytelling, and ceremonial performances serve as repositories of cultural knowledge, artistic creativity, historical memory, and collective identity. Their continued performance enables cultural meanings and artistic skills to be transmitted across generations.

Lakhon is one of Thailand's major traditions of classical theatre, presenting dramatic narratives through movement, music, visual design, literary composition, and ritual practice. Unlike *Ram* and *Rabam*, which generally emphasize dance rather than extended narratives, Lakhon is primarily centred on storytelling. Performances typically unfold through stylized gestures, refined choreography, musical accompaniment, symbolic costumes, and carefully structured scenes rather than the realistic dialogue and acting commonly found in modern theatre.

In many forms of Lakhon, dance functions as the principal language of expression. Individual movements communicate a character's personality, emotions, intentions, and relationships with others. This close relationship between movement and narrative explains why Lakhon is commonly understood as Thai dance drama. However, some forms, such as *Lakhon Phud*, place greater emphasis on spoken dialogue. Across its different forms, Lakhon integrates acting, music, literary scripts, stage design, elaborate costumes, and spiritual ceremonies associated with performance.

The narrative repertoire of Lakhon is highly diverse, drawing from Thai folk literature, Buddhist Jataka tales, and literary traditions adopted from other cultures. Well-known stories include *Phra Suthon*, *Sangthong*, and *Khawi*, while others demonstrate cross-cultural connections, such as *Inao*, derived from the Javanese Panji tradition **(Figure 43)**, and *Unnarut*, associated with the Indian story of Aniruddha. This diversity distinguishes Lakhon from *Khon*, the masked dance drama traditionally based on the *Ramakien*, Thailand's adaptation of the *Ramayana* (UNESCO, 2018).



Figure 43. Lakhon Inao
Source: dek-d.com

Lakhon Inao is a refined form of Thai royal court dance drama based on the Panji stories originating from Java. It follows Prince Inao and his complex relationship with Princess Busaba through themes of love, duty, jealousy, conflict, and reconciliation. Traditionally performed in the elegant *Lakhon Nai* style, it is characterized by graceful choreography, poetic narration, classical music, elaborate costumes, and expressive gestures. The version composed during the reign of King Rama II is regarded as an outstanding work of Thai dramatic literature and dance drama, illustrating how a Javanese narrative was adapted into a distinctive expression of Thai court culture (Fine Arts Department, 2026).

Traditional music, folk performances, regional dances, and local storytelling further enrich Thailand's cultural landscape. These practices support cultural continuity while providing tourism experiences that enhance visitors' understanding of Thai history, beliefs, values, and artistic traditions. However, their presentation for tourism should preserve cultural meanings and recognize the knowledge and contributions of performers and cultural practitioners.

Performing arts are increasingly important in experience-based tourism because they combine visual, emotional, educational, and cultural dimensions. Recent research indicates that authenticity, uniqueness, and participation contribute to memorable cultural experiences, while high-quality performing arts experiences can strengthen tourist satisfaction and destination image (Meeprom & Talawanich, 2026; Salem et al., 2026).

3.4.4 Traditional Knowledge and Local Wisdom

Traditional knowledge systems represent another critical form of intangible cultural capital. They encompass accumulated knowledge related to agriculture, food production, environmental management, medicine, craftsmanship, spirituality, and community organization. Such knowledge is commonly transmitted through oral instruction, observation, practice, and apprenticeship rather than through formal education.

Thailand possesses extensive traditional knowledge that continues to influence contemporary society and tourism development. Agricultural practices, herbal medicine, food preparation, handicraft production, and ecological knowledge contribute to community resilience while providing opportunities for cultural interpretation and participatory tourism experiences.

Thai craft weaving **(Figure 44)** reflects traditional knowledge and local wisdom transmitted across generations within communities. Weavers apply locally available materials, natural dyes, inherited patterns, and specialized techniques that express regional identity, beliefs, social values, and relationships with the natural environment. Textiles such as *mudmee*, *khit*, and *yok dok* are therefore more than decorative products; they embody knowledge of fibre preparation, dyeing, pattern design, and weaving. Research on Thai Phuan textiles demonstrates that traditional patterns and community identity can also support product development and local value creation (Egwutvongsa, 2023). Initiatives in Nan similarly show how local weaving knowledge can be connected with contemporary design,

community branding, and creative tourism without abandoning its cultural foundations (Chulalongkorn University, 2023).



Figure 44. Thai Crafts Weaving
Source: chiangmainews.co.th

In addition, traditional wellness practices, including herbal medicine, Thai massage, meditation, and holistic approaches to health, are also significant forms of Thai local wisdom. *Nuad Thai* was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019 and is recognized as part of the art, science, and culture of traditional Thai healthcare (UNESCO, 2019). These practices contribute to Thailand's international wellness image, with Thai therapies, massage, and herbal remedies increasingly integrated into spa and wellness tourism experiences (Global Wellness Institute, 2026).

3.4.5 Gastronomy as Intangible Cultural Capital

Among Thailand's most influential forms of intangible cultural capital is its gastronomy. Food represents more than a means of sustenance; it embodies cultural identity, historical memory, local knowledge, social relationships, and creative expression. In this sense, culinary traditions function as living heritage, preserving cultural meanings while also adapting to changing social and economic contexts (UNESCO, 2026).

Thai cuisine **(Figure 45)** reflects centuries of cultural interaction shaped by trade, migration, regional exchange, and local innovation. These influences have contributed to the richness and diversity of Thai food culture. Regional variations further strengthen this diversity, as Northern, Northeastern, Central, and Southern Thai cuisines each reflect distinctive ingredients, cooking techniques, historical influences, and cultural traditions.



Figure 45. Thai Gastronomy
Source: natthinee9.wordpress.com

The global popularity of Thai cuisine has transformed gastronomy into one of Thailand's most powerful forms of cultural capital and soft power. Gastronomy tourism increasingly contributes to destination attractiveness by allowing visitors to experience local culture through food consumption, cooking classes, culinary festivals, market visits, and food-related storytelling. Such experiences can enhance perceived authenticity, visitor satisfaction, and destination differentiation, making gastronomy an important source of tourism competitiveness (Ellis et al., 2018; Okumus, 2021). International tourism organizations also recognize gastronomy as a strategic

area linking culture, local development, and visitor experience (UNWTO & Basque Culinary Center, 2019).

3.4.6 Hospitality and Social Values

Hospitality represents an important yet often overlooked form of intangible cultural capital. It is embedded in social norms, cultural values, interpersonal relationships, and community practices that shape how visitors are welcomed, assisted, and treated. Hospitality therefore extends beyond formal service delivery to include culturally influenced expressions of generosity, respect, warmth, and concern for others.

Thai hospitality is widely recognized as a defining feature of the country's tourism experience. Cultural concepts such as *nam jai* (generosity), *kreng jai* (consideration for others), and *sanuk* (enjoyment) influence interactions between hosts and visitors. Recent research identifies *nam jai* as an important foundation of relational warmth in Thai hospitality, while *kreng jai* encourages respectful interactions and social harmony within service encounters (Chotisarn et al., 2025; Nuchpramool et al., 2025). These values can enhance emotional experiences, visitor satisfaction, destination image, and loyalty, making Thai hospitality a strategic cultural and tourism resource rather than merely a social characteristic (Rittichainuwat et al., 2020; Sodawan & Hsu, 2025).

3.4.7 Intangible Cultural Capital and Soft Power

The relationship between intangible cultural capital and soft power is particularly significant. Intangible cultural expressions can circulate across borders through tourism, media, education, migration, digital platforms, and cultural exchange. Cuisine, festivals, performing arts, wellness traditions, martial arts, and social practices consequently become recognizable symbols through which countries communicate their identities and cultural values. These expressions can strengthen national image, intercultural understanding, and international attractiveness when they are presented in meaningful and credible ways (UNESCO, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024).

Thailand's soft-power development increasingly draws upon its intangible cultural capital. Government initiatives have incorporated these assets into tourism promotion and creative-industry development, demonstrating their strategic value beyond cultural preservation alone (Royal Thai Government, 2023, 2025). However, their long-term soft-power value depends on maintaining authenticity, supporting cultural practitioners, and ensuring that commercial development does not weaken their cultural meanings.

3.4.8 Challenges in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Capital

Despite its considerable value, intangible cultural capital faces significant challenges. Globalization, urbanization, demographic change, modernization, and changing lifestyles may weaken the transmission of traditional knowledge and cultural practices. Younger generations may become less engaged with local traditions, while tourism and commercial demand may encourage cultural expressions to be modified to meet visitor expectations (UNESCO, 2022).

Scholars caution against reducing living heritage to tourism commodities. Although commercialization can generate income and support cultural revitalization, excessive commercial influence may prioritize market value over cultural meaning, encourage imitation, and weaken authenticity and community ownership (Wang et al., 2024). Sustainable tourism therefore requires a balance between economic use, cultural integrity, and the continued evolution of living traditions. Perceived authenticity remains particularly important because it influences tourist engagement, destination image, and loyalty in intangible cultural heritage tourism (Zuo et al., 2024).

Community participation is essential because intangible cultural capital resides in the knowledge, skills, memories, and practices of cultural bearers. Effective safeguarding therefore requires communities to participate in identifying, interpreting, transmitting, and managing their cultural expressions. Tourism benefits should also support cultural practitioners, intergenerational learning, and community well-being rather

than contributing to cultural exploitation or degradation (UNESCO, 2022).

3.5 Creative Cultural Capital

While tangible and intangible cultural capital are commonly associated with historical inheritance and cultural preservation, contemporary tourism increasingly depends on a third dimension: creative cultural capital. Creative cultural capital refers to the capacity of individuals, communities, organizations, and societies to generate new cultural expressions, reinterpret traditional heritage, foster innovation, and create value through creativity. It encompasses creative industries, artistic production, design, media, cultural entrepreneurship, digital content, and creative experiences that transform cultural resources into new forms of economic, social, and symbolic value. Cultural and creative activities therefore possess both cultural and economic significance, supporting artistic expression, employment, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2023; UNCTAD, 2024).

In the twenty-first century, creativity has become an important driver of tourism competitiveness. As destinations face increasing competition and more sophisticated visitor expectations, conventional attractions alone may be insufficient to maintain long-term differentiation. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek active, authentic, and participatory experiences that enable them to engage with local culture. Creativity allows destinations to reinterpret cultural resources, develop distinctive narratives, and provide opportunities for learning and co-

creation. Recent research identifies authenticity, cultural participation, sustainability, and co-creation as central themes in the development of creative tourism (Sharma et al., 2024).

The concept of creative cultural capital builds upon cultural capital theory and creative economy perspectives. Whereas traditional cultural capital emphasizes inherited cultural resources, creative cultural capital focuses on the ability to generate new meanings, products, and experiences from these resources. It reflects how societies adapt heritage, traditions, and cultural knowledge to contemporary social, economic, and technological contexts. Digitalization further expands this capacity by creating new channels for cultural production, distribution, storytelling, and audience engagement (UNCTAD, 2024).

3.5.1 The Rise of the Creative Economy

The growing significance of creative cultural capital is closely linked to the emergence of the creative economy. The creative economy encompasses industries based on creativity, cultural knowledge, intellectual property, innovation, and artistic expression. These include film, music, performing arts, design, fashion, architecture, publishing, digital media, gaming, advertising, cultural tourism, and other creative services.

Creative industries have become important contributors to employment, entrepreneurship, innovation, and international trade. UNCTAD (2024) reported that creative services exports reached USD 1.4 trillion in 2022, representing a 29% increase from 2017, while creative goods exports reached USD 713 billion. The creative economy also contributes differently across

national contexts, accounting for approximately 0.5–7.3% of GDP and 0.5–12.5% of employment in the countries surveyed. These figures demonstrate that culture is not only a heritage resource but also a dynamic source of economic diversification and future development (UNCTAD, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

For tourism destinations, the creative economy provides opportunities to develop new products, enrich visitor experiences, and strengthen destination identity. Creative industries intersect with tourism through festivals, design districts, art markets, cultural performances, workshops, film tourism, digital content, and creative entrepreneurship. These activities enable destinations to combine local cultural resources with contemporary creativity, thereby encouraging participation, differentiation, and destination competitiveness (Dias et al., 2023).

3.5.2 Creative Tourism and Experience Co-Creation

One of the most important applications of creative cultural capital is the development of creative tourism. Unlike traditional cultural tourism, which often emphasizes the passive observation of attractions, creative tourism focuses on active participation, learning, and interaction with local communities. It enables visitors to develop knowledge and skills through culturally distinctive activities while contributing to the co-creation of meaningful tourism experiences (Sharma et al., 2025).

Creative tourism may involve cooking, traditional crafts, music, dance, visual arts, design, storytelling, and other forms of cultural production. Through these activities, tourists become active participants rather than passive consumers. Experience co-creation is shaped by dimensions such as interaction, participation, immersion, authenticity, education, and personalization, which can enhance the perceived value of tourism experiences (Deng et al., 2024). In Thailand, cooking classes **(Figure 46)** illustrate how visitors and local hosts can jointly create cultural and culinary value through knowledge sharing and direct participation (Qian et al., 2023).



Figure 46. Thai Cooking Class
Source: houseoftastecooking.com

3.5.3 Creative Cultural Capital in Thailand

Thailand possesses considerable creative cultural capital derived from its cultural traditions, artistic heritage, local wisdom, entrepreneurial capabilities, and expanding creative industries. Over the past two decades, creativity has increasingly been recognized as a strategic resource for generating economic value, enhancing tourism competitiveness, and strengthening Thailand's cultural soft power.

Government support for the creative economy reflects this growing recognition. The Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), established as a creative knowledge and design resource centre, has played an important role in developing the capabilities of designers, entrepreneurs, students, and creative professionals **(Figure 47)**. Its institutional development later contributed to the establishment of the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), which promotes creative people, creative businesses, and creative places by connecting creativity with cultural capital, local wisdom, technology, and production (Creative Economy Agency, 2026; Thailand Creative & Design Center, 2026).



Figure 47. Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC)
Source: api.guideglai.com

Thailand's participation in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network further demonstrates how creativity is being integrated into local development and tourism strategies. Through fields such as crafts and folk art, design, gastronomy, and creative industries, participating cities can use local cultural resources to support entrepreneurship, urban development, cultural exchange, and distinctive visitor experiences (UNESCO, 2026).

3.5.4 Creative Cities and Cultural Innovation

The concept of creative cities provides another important perspective on creative cultural capital. Creative cities are urban environments that use culture, creativity, innovation, and cultural industries as drivers of development, place-making, and competitiveness (Landry, 2020). Such cities create ecosystems that encourage artistic production, entrepreneurship, cultural exchange, and collaboration, while also strengthening their attractiveness for residents, visitors, and investors (UNESCO, 2026).

In Thailand, several cities have gained recognition for their creative potential. Chiang Mai, for example, has developed a strong reputation for crafts, design, cultural tourism, and artistic production. Its combination of Lanna heritage, creative communities, educational institutions, and tourism infrastructure has contributed to its recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art, demonstrating how cultural heritage and creativity can be integrated into urban development and destination branding (UNESCO, 2026).



Figure 48. Chiang Mai Craft Week
Source: mamuangdiy.com

Chiang Mai Crafts Week **(Figure 48)** illustrates this creative dynamic. The event showcases traditional craftsmanship, contemporary design, and the local wisdom of northern Thailand through exhibitions, craft markets, demonstrations, and hands-on workshops. By presenting inherited skills in forms relevant to contemporary lifestyles, the festival supports knowledge transmission, generates income for local makers, and reinforces Chiang Mai's identity as a destination for Lanna culture and creative tourism (Thailand Creative & Design Center, 2026).

Similarly, Bangkok's creative districts, art spaces, festivals, and design-led initiatives demonstrate how urban creativity contributes to destination attractiveness and cultural innovation. Bangkok's recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Design further reflects the growing integration of creativity into tourism planning, urban regeneration, and destination branding in Thailand (UNESCO, 2026).

3.5.5 Film, Media, and Digital Cultural Production

Contemporary creative cultural capital increasingly extends into film, media, and digital content. Digital technologies have transformed how culture is produced, distributed, and consumed, creating new opportunities for cultural expression, destination storytelling, and tourism promotion. In the context of the creative economy, digital cultural production has become an important mechanism through which destinations communicate identity, expand visibility, and generate symbolic as well as economic value (UNCTAD, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

Thailand has developed into an important film-production centre in Southeast Asia, supported by its diverse natural and urban locations, experienced crews, technical services, studio facilities, and competitive production environment. Government support, including foreign-film incentives and rebate measures, has further strengthened the country's attractiveness as a filming destination (Thailand Film Office, 2026) **(Figure 49)**. Beyond generating employment and income, film production helps introduce Thai landscapes, culture, cuisine, and lifestyles to international audiences, thereby contributing to the creative economy, national soft power, and film-induced tourism (Kim & Reijnders, 2021).



Figure 49. Film Production in Thailand
Source: lbbonline.com

The rapid growth of social media has further expanded the role of content creators from entertainers and reviewers to influential cultural promoters. Through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, creators present Thai food, festivals, crafts, performing arts, lifestyles, and destinations to global audiences through accessible visual storytelling. Their narratives and interactions can make cultural content more relatable, while also influencing travel intention, destination image, and cultural consumption (Pop et al., 2022; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017) **(Figure 50)**. Tourism organizations increasingly collaborate with creators and influencers to communicate destination experiences to wider audiences. However, effective cultural promotion requires local traditions to be represented accurately and respectfully in collaboration with host communities.

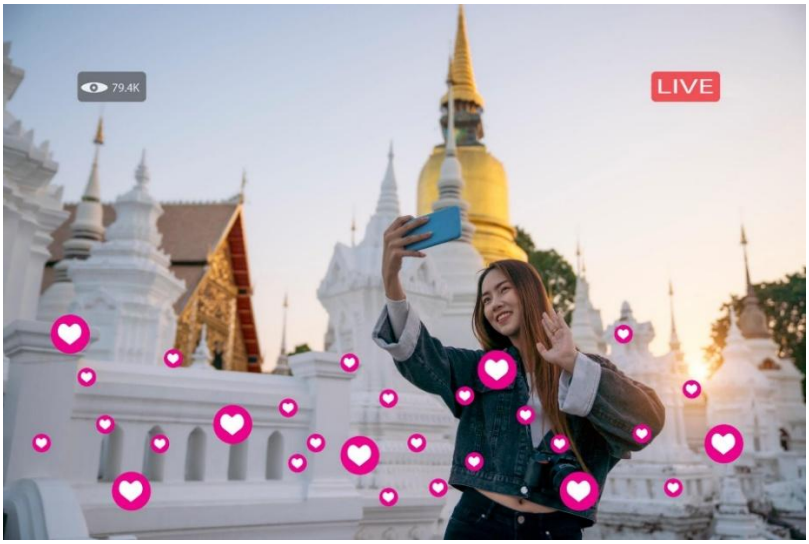


Figure 50. Social Media Creators
Source: Prasongsin via Getty Images

Film tourism provides a notable example of the connection between media exposure and tourism demand. Destinations featured in films, television series, documentaries, and online media often attract increased visitor interest because audiences develop familiarity, emotional attachment, and curiosity toward those places. In this way, screen-based cultural production can support destination branding and tourism promotion while reinforcing national image (Kim & Reijnders, 2021; Tiwasing et al., 2022) **(Figure 51)**. Thailand has benefited from this process as media exposure continues to support awareness of its destinations, cultural experiences, and broader soft-power appeal.



Figure 51. Culture-based Film Production
Source: letsbemerry.com

3.6 Regional Cultural Diversity

One of Thailand's greatest cultural strengths lies not in cultural uniformity but in its remarkable regional diversity. Although the country is often presented internationally through a unified national identity, its cultural landscape varies considerably in terms of history, language, ethnicity, religion, cuisine, architecture, festivals, lifestyles, and cultural practices. These differences reflect long-standing processes of migration, trade, environmental adaptation, and cultural exchange. Collectively, they form a rich reservoir of cultural capital that supports destination differentiation and strengthens Thailand's cultural tourism appeal. UNESCO's work with ethnic communities in Thailand similarly illustrates how diverse local knowledge, ecological practices, beliefs, and cultural traditions remain embedded in particular communities and environments (UNESCO, 2024).

From a tourism perspective, regional cultural diversity expands the range of experiences available to visitors. Rather than offering a single cultural narrative, Thailand presents multiple regional identities and cultural landscapes that can respond to different tourist interests. This diversity provides a foundation for heritage, gastronomic, religious, community-based, creative, and experiential tourism while reducing dependence on a limited range of destinations and products. Research in Thailand also indicates that cultural immersion can strengthen visitors' enjoyment, cultural empathy, and attachment to creative cultural destinations (Chiengkul & Kumjorn, 2024).

Regional diversity also contributes to cultural resilience by sustaining local identities, languages, knowledge systems, and community traditions in the face of globalization and cultural homogenization. Tourism development that respects these distinctive local qualities can support cultural revival and community well-being; however, it should involve local communities in determining how their cultures are represented and used (Paddison & Hall, 2024). Regional cultural diversity therefore represents a strategic tourism asset capable of enriching visitor experiences, supporting local development, and strengthening the long-term sustainability of Thailand's tourism sector.

3.6.1 Northern Thailand: Lanna Cultural Heritage

Northern Thailand possesses one of the country's most distinctive regional identities, shaped primarily by the historical legacy of the former Lanna Kingdom. Centered on Chiang Mai, the region developed its own artistic traditions, architectural forms, religious practices, crafts, and cultural expressions that continue to influence contemporary society and tourism development. This combination of heritage and living culture has helped position Chiang Mai as an important cultural and creative destination in Thailand (UNESCO, 2026).

Lanna cultural heritage is visible in temple architecture, traditional festivals, handicrafts, music, dance, language, and cuisine. Northern temples often display distinctive forms characterized by layered roofs, detailed woodwork, and decorative elements that reflect local artistic traditions **(Figure**

52). Traditional crafts such as wood carving, silverwork, textile production, and umbrella making also remain important cultural industries that contribute to visitor experiences and local livelihoods (UNESCO, 2026).

The region's culinary traditions further strengthen its cultural distinctiveness. Dishes such as *khao soi*, *sai ua*, *nam prik ong*, and northern curries reflect local ingredients, historical influences, and regional food culture. Gastronomic tourism has therefore become an important way for visitors to experience northern identity while supporting local communities and small-scale cultural enterprises (Ellis et al., 2018; Okumus, 2021).





Figure 52. Lanna Architecture
Source: theabroadguide.com

Festivals such as Yi Peng **(Figure 53)** provide additional examples of Northern Thailand's intangible cultural capital. Known for its lantern-related ceremonies and strong spiritual symbolism, Yi Peng attracts both domestic and international visitors while reinforcing regional identity and cultural continuity. As with other cultural festivals, its tourism value depends on preserving authenticity and maintaining meaningful community participation (Le et al., 2024; Chiengkul & Kumjorn, 2024).



Figure 53. Yi Peng, Thai Lantern Ceremony
Source: Marie via Pinterest

3.6.2 Northeastern Thailand: Isan Cultural Identity

Northeastern Thailand, commonly known as Isan, possesses a distinctive regional identity shaped by long-standing Lao cultural connections, Khmer influences, Buddhist traditions, migration, and adaptation to the local environment. These influences are expressed through language, architecture,

religious practices, music, festivals, food, and handicrafts. The Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival is a prominent example, combining Buddhist Lent traditions, community participation, candle-carving skills, and cultural performance into an internationally recognized tourism event (TAT, 2025) **(Figure 54)**.



Figure 54. Ubon Ratchathani Candle Festival
Source: publicdomainpictures.net

Language represents one of the region's most important cultural characteristics. Isan-Lao is spoken in diverse regional varieties across northeastern Thailand and remains closely connected to local identity and everyday cultural expression (Naksuk & Phimwankham, 2024). Traditional music, particularly *mor lam*, is another recognizable expression of Isan culture **(Figure 55)**. Its lyrics and performances communicate local

ways of life, beliefs, social issues, and community knowledge. Contemporary *mor lam* has also incorporated modern musical styles and digital media while retaining its regional identity, enabling it to reach younger and wider audiences (Julakarn, 2025; Srisakkayawarangkun, 2023).



Figure 55. Mor Lam Performance
Source: theisaanrecord.co

The region's culinary heritage constitutes another important form of cultural capital. Dishes such as *som tam*, *larb*, *gai yang*, and sticky rice reflect local ingredients, food knowledge, social practices, and the influence of neighbouring cultures. Their popularity throughout Thailand and abroad has increased the visibility of Isan identity, while food markets and local restaurants provide opportunities for gastronomic tourism and community income generation (TAT, 2024).

Cultural festivals, silk weaving, religious ceremonies, and community-based tourism further enhance Isan's tourism appeal. Khon Kaen's *mudmee* silk, for example, incorporates patterns associated with local symbols, beliefs, and identity while supporting craft-based tourism and community enterprises (TAT, 2023) **(Figure 56).** Destinations such as Ubon Ratchathani, Khon Kaen, and Nakhon Ratchasima increasingly use these cultural assets to strengthen regional branding and diversify tourism experiences.



Figure 56. Khon Kaen Traditional Silk
Source: asiakingtravel.com

3.6.2 Central Thailand: The Cultural Core

Central Thailand has historically functioned as the political, economic, and cultural core of the Thai nation. The region includes Bangkok, Ayutthaya, and numerous sites associated with the formation of the Thai state and the development of royal, religious, and urban culture. As a result, Central Thailand plays a major role in shaping national identity and representing Thai culture to international audiences (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Many of Thailand's most iconic cultural attractions are located in the Central Region. Historical cities, royal palaces, Buddhist temples, museums, and cultural institutions contribute significantly to the country's tourism image. The Historic City of Ayutthaya, for example, remains one of Thailand's most important heritage destinations and a major symbol of the country's historical legacy. At the same time, the region also serves as a centre of contemporary cultural production, creative industries, education, and international tourism.

Cuisine in Central Thailand is often regarded as the foundation of what many international visitors recognize as Thai food. Dishes such as *tom yum goong*, green curry, *pad thai*, and *massaman curry* have become internationally associated with Thai gastronomy. These culinary traditions contribute significantly to Thailand's cultural capital, destination image, and soft power, particularly as food tourism and culinary experiences continue to grow in global importance (Ellis et al., 2018; Okumus, 2021; Royal Thai Government, 2023).

Bangkok itself functions as a cultural crossroads where traditional heritage, modern lifestyles, creative industries, and global influences converge **(Figure 57)**. This combination has helped make the city one of the most dynamic urban cultural destinations in Asia. Bangkok's recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Design further reflects the importance of creativity and cultural innovation in its contemporary urban identity (UNESCO, 2026).



Figure 57. Historical Area of Bangkok
Source: into-asia.com and asiakingtravel.com

3.6.3 Southern Thailand: Maritime and Multicultural Heritage

Southern Thailand possesses a distinctive cultural identity shaped by maritime trade, multicultural interaction, and long-standing connections with the Malay world. Its strategic location along historical sea routes facilitated cultural exchange among Thai, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and European communities. These interactions are reflected in the region's languages, religions, architecture, cuisine, livelihoods, and everyday cultural practices.

Koh Panyee Fishing Village in Phang Nga illustrates the close relationship between maritime environments, cultural adaptation, and community identity **(Figure 58)**. Predominantly inhabited by a Thai Muslim fishing community, the settlement is distinguished by houses, pathways, shops, and public facilities constructed on stilts over the water. Fishing remains an important livelihood alongside tourism-related activities. The village therefore represents not only a coastal attraction but also a living cultural landscape that demonstrates how communities have adapted their settlement patterns and livelihoods to the marine environment (TAT, 2026).



Figure 58. Koh Panyee Fishing Village, Phang Nga
Source: dasta.or.th and cawater-info.net

Religious diversity is particularly evident in Southern Thailand. While Buddhism remains influential in many areas, Islam plays a major role in several southern provinces, contributing to distinctive cultural landscapes characterized by mosques, Muslim communities, halal cuisine, and multicultural traditions. Traditional fishing settlements and coastal communities further demonstrate the region's connections with the sea and the wider Malay cultural world.

Southern cuisine represents another important form of cultural capital. Known for its intense flavours, seafood, and distinctive use of herbs and spices, Southern Thai food reflects both environmental conditions and historical trade connections. Dishes such as *gaeng tai pla*, *kua kling*, and various seafood specialities contribute to the region's gastronomic identity **(Figure 59)**. The recognition of Phuket as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy further demonstrates the cultural and tourism significance of Southern Thailand's diverse culinary heritage (UNESCO, 2026).





Figure 59. *Gaeng Tai Pla* and *Kua Kling*
Source: thairath.co.th and nileverfoodsolutions.co.th

Yala's Railway Market provides a more everyday representation of Southern Thailand's food culture and multicultural society **(Figure 60)**. The market connects rural producers, small-scale vendors, and urban consumers through the exchange of vegetables, prepared food, and other local products. It also functions as a shared social space where people from different cultural and religious backgrounds interact. UNDP Thailand identifies local food markets as important mechanisms for supporting household income, inclusive development, community relationships, and the preservation of regional culinary heritage (O-In et al., 2023).



Figure 60. Yala's Railway Market
Source: undp-ric.medium.com

Cultural festivals, traditional fishing communities, boat-building knowledge, local markets, and maritime heritage further enrich the region's cultural landscape. Tourism initiatives increasingly seek to integrate these resources into destination experiences that complement Southern Thailand's internationally recognized natural attractions. When developed with community participation, these cultural assets can strengthen local livelihoods, preserve regional identity, and encourage visitors to engage more deeply with the South's multicultural heritage.

3.6.4 Eastern Thailand: Emerging Cultural Landscapes

Although often associated with industrial development and coastal tourism, Eastern Thailand possesses diverse cultural resources shaped by maritime trade, migration, agriculture, fishing, and cross-border exchange. Historical trading communities, Chinese and Vietnamese influences, fruit cultivation, local cuisine, religious traditions, and community festivals collectively contribute to the region's distinctive cultural capital.

Chanthaburi illustrates this multicultural heritage through its historic riverside community, Buddhist temples, Catholic cathedral, traditional shop houses, gemstone and jewellery trade, and local culinary culture. The province is also well known for durian, mangosteen, rambutan, and other tropical fruits, with orchard tourism providing visitors with opportunities to learn about local agriculture and food production (TAT, 2023; TAT, 2026).



Figure 61. Chanthaburi Province
Source: smethailandclub.com and siamguides.com

Figure 61 reflects Chanthaburi's emerging cultural landscape, where historical architecture, religious landmarks, traditional commerce, and contemporary tourism coexist. These cultural features demonstrate that the province's attractiveness extends beyond natural resources to include multicultural heritage, local livelihoods, and distinctive urban identity.

Within the formal Eastern Economic Corridor, comprising Chachoengsao, Chonburi, and Rayong, community-based and cultural tourism can help balance rapid economic modernization with cultural preservation and local development. Recent research emphasizes that this balance requires community participation, locally relevant skills development, inclusive governance, and improved access to financial and institutional support (Lee-Anant & Kungwansith, 2025). Integrating cultural capital into regional planning can therefore diversify tourism experiences while strengthening community ownership, economic resilience, and the long-term sustainability of Eastern Thailand.

3.6.5 Western Thailand: Borderland Cultures and Cultural Landscapes

Western Thailand is characterized by mountainous environments, extensive forest landscapes, ethnic diversity, and borderland communities. Its location along the Thailand–Myanmar border has supported long-term movement and cultural exchange among Thai, Mon, Karen, Burmese, and other ethnic communities. Their languages, religious beliefs, traditional knowledge, agricultural practices, foodways, and festivals contribute significantly to Thailand's broader cultural diversity. UNESCO has also highlighted the importance of community-based transmission and documentation in safeguarding the living heritage and ecological knowledge of ethnic communities in Kanchanaburi (UNESCO, 2024).

Community-based tourism has become particularly important in Western Thailand, where tourism activities frequently combine cultural exchange, ecological conservation, local lifestyles, and traditional knowledge. Kanchanaburi offers multidimensional tourism experiences through its natural landscapes, Second World War heritage, historic railway, religious sites, and culturally diverse communities. Sangkhlaburi is especially significant as a borderland destination where Mon, Karen, Thai, and Burmese cultural traditions coexist. Recent research indicates that its cultural and religious heritage provides strong tourism potential, although sustainable development requires community participation, coordinated governance, and appropriate infrastructure (Dharawanij & Yaiyong, 2025).

The Mon Bridge at Sangkhlaburi represents the relationship between cultural identity, community life, and the surrounding landscape **(Figure 62)**. It connects the town with the Mon community of Ban Wang Ka and serves not only as a tourism landmark but also as a social and cultural space associated with daily life, religious practices, local trade, and community interaction. Together with traditional agriculture, handicrafts, ethnic cuisine, and local festivals, these resources support local livelihoods while strengthening the cultural identity and tourism appeal of Western Thailand (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023).

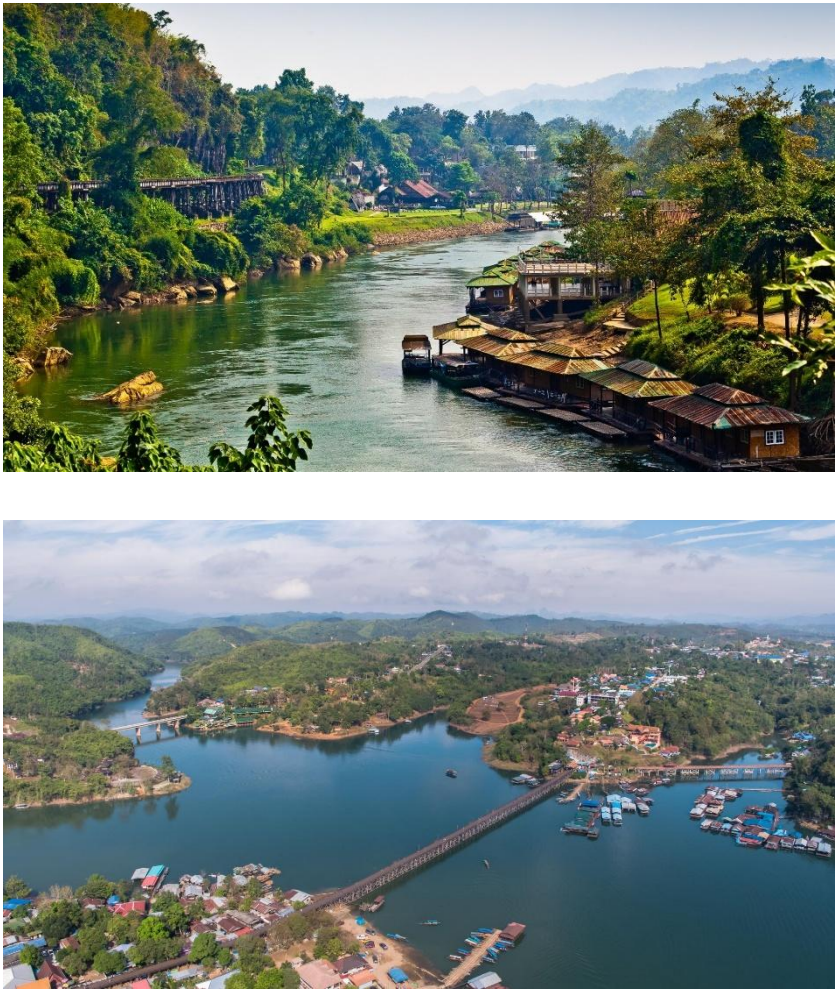


Figure 62. Kanchanaburi and Mon Bridge at Sangkhlaburi
Source: thairath.co.th and travelthaiblog.com

3.7 Contemporary Challenges

Thailand's cultural capital provides a strong foundation for tourism development, but its continued value cannot be taken for granted. Cultural resources are dynamic, vulnerable, and closely connected to communities, environments, and social systems. As Thailand increasingly promotes heritage, festivals, gastronomy, wellness, and creative industries as tourism and soft-power assets, it must address several interconnected challenges, including overtourism, cultural commodification, authenticity, climate change, unequal benefit distribution, digital transformation, and fragmented governance.

One of the most pressing challenges is managing tourism growth without damaging cultural resources or reducing residents' quality of life. Thailand welcomed more than 35 million international visitors in 2024, demonstrating a strong post-pandemic recovery and the country's continuing global appeal (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024). However, concentrated visitor flows can create congestion, waste, infrastructure pressure, and physical deterioration at temples, historic districts, festivals, and heritage sites. The challenge is therefore not simply to attract more tourists but to manage visitor flows, disperse demand, and distribute tourism benefits more equitably.

Heritage tourism illustrates this tension clearly. Cultural heritage can generate employment, strengthen destination identity, and provide resources for conservation, but poorly managed tourism may also threaten cultural integrity. A bibliometric analysis by Geçikli et al. (2024) found that

conservation, authenticity, visitor experience, World Heritage status, and place attachment have become increasingly prominent themes in cultural heritage tourism research. This development suggests that heritage tourism should be evaluated not only by visitor numbers and revenue but also by its capacity to safeguard cultural values and support long-term sustainability.

Thailand's historic cities face similar concerns. In Chiang Mai Old Town, Somnuxpong and Chiarasumran (2024) found that potential World Heritage recognition could increase tourism, income, and educational opportunities. However, it could also raise living costs, generate additional waste, and weaken local culture if heritage is treated primarily as a commodity for visitors. Heritage recognition alone therefore does not guarantee sustainability; it must be accompanied by visitor management, community participation, conservation planning, and ongoing impact assessment.

Cultural commodification represents another major challenge. When traditions are adapted primarily to meet tourism demand, festivals, rituals, crafts, cuisine, and performances may become simplified, staged, or separated from their original meanings. Commercialization is not necessarily harmful because tourism income can support cultural practitioners and encourage cultural transmission. Problems arise, however, when market expectations take priority over cultural values or when communities lose control over how their traditions are represented and used (Wang et al., 2024).

Figure 63 is relevant to this issue because hill-tribe tourism demonstrates the complex relationship between cultural

visibility and commodification. Tourism can generate income and public interest in ethnic cultures, but it may also reduce diverse communities to costumes, staged performances, photographs, and generalized images of "traditional life." Responsible tourism should therefore involve community members in deciding what aspects of their culture may be shared, how they should be interpreted, and how tourism benefits should be distributed.



Figure 63. Hill Tribe Cultural Commodification
Source: chailaiorchid.com

Authenticity is consequently central to cultural capital tourism management. Authenticity should not mean preserving Thai culture in an unchanging form, as living cultures naturally adapt over time. Instead, it should reflect cultural credibility,

community ownership, and continuity of meaning. Tourism promotion should avoid reducing "Thainess" to a narrow collection of temples, smiles, food, festivals, and decorative traditions. Local communities should be able to define what is culturally meaningful rather than having cultural identity determined solely by market demand.

Climate change presents another serious challenge. The World Bank (2025) identifies flooding, coastal erosion, water shortages, heat stress, and air pollution as significant threats to Thailand's economy and tourism sector. These risks affect not only coastal destinations but also cultural landscapes, historic communities, monuments, transport systems, festivals, and visitor safety. Climate adaptation should therefore be incorporated into heritage conservation, land-use planning, infrastructure investment, disaster preparedness, and destination management.

Digital transformation creates both opportunities and risks. Digital platforms, artificial intelligence, data analytics, virtual experiences, and smart tourism systems can support visitor management, interpretation, marketing, and personalized travel experiences. Manotungvorapun and Gerdsri (2025) propose a national sustainable tourism roadmap that connects tourism development with digital platforms, green technologies, smart tourism, research, and supporting infrastructure. Nevertheless, digital promotion may rapidly direct large numbers of visitors toward fragile cultural sites, while communities and small businesses with limited technological capacity may receive fewer benefits. Digital development must therefore be

accompanied by digital inclusion, responsible communication, and effective visitor-distribution strategies.

Community participation remains one of the most important conditions for sustainable cultural tourism. Cultural capital does not exist only in monuments and museums; it is also embedded in people, memories, knowledge, skills, and everyday practices. When communities are excluded from tourism planning, external businesses may capture most economic benefits while residents experience congestion, rising costs, cultural disruption, and limited decision-making power. UNESCO emphasizes that communities should participate meaningfully in tourism planning, heritage interpretation, visitor management, and the safeguarding of living heritage (UNESCO, 2024).

Thailand must also balance national soft-power strategies with regional and cultural diversity. National branding benefits from recognizable cultural symbols, but Thailand's cultural identity is complex and diverse. Lanna heritage, Isan traditions, Southern multiculturalism, Central royal and Buddhist heritage, borderland cultures, and ethnic communities all contribute to the country's cultural capital. An inclusive soft-power strategy should recognize this diversity rather than privileging only the cultural expressions that are easiest to market internationally.

International recognition creates both opportunities and responsibilities. UNESCO's inscription of Songkran in Thailand on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2023 enhanced the festival's global visibility and acknowledged its values of family reunion, respect for older

adults, cooperation, and symbolic renewal (UNESCO, 2023). However, greater visibility may also encourage commercialization and overcrowding. Recognition must therefore be accompanied by safeguarding measures that preserve community participation and the festival's cultural significance.

To close the chapter, the future of Thailand's cultural capital depends on effective governance. Cultural capital tourism management requires coordination among government agencies, local authorities, communities, tourism businesses, cultural institutions, educators, and visitors. Rather than pursuing unlimited growth, Thailand should prioritize value-based tourism that protects cultural integrity, strengthens local communities, improves visitor understanding, and supports climate resilience. The central challenge is to move beyond using culture merely as an attraction and toward managing it as a living, inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable strategic resource.

Chapter 4
Soft Power Tourism in Thailand

4.1 Thailand's Soft Power Strategy

In recent years, Thailand has increasingly positioned soft power as an important pillar of national development, economic transformation, cultural promotion, and tourism competitiveness. Culture has long contributed to the country's international attractiveness through gastronomy, wellness, festivals, heritage, creative industries, and hospitality. The emergence of a formal national strategy, however, represents a shift from treating these cultural assets primarily as tourism attractions toward viewing them as strategic resources capable of generating economic value, strengthening national identity, and enhancing international influence.

Thailand's strategy has developed within a global environment in which countries increasingly compete through culture, creativity, reputation, and attraction. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. From this perspective, Thailand's cultural resources can produce soft power when they create admiration, familiarity, trust, and sustained interest among international audiences. Soft power therefore involves more than exporting cultural products; it depends on how international audiences perceive the country, its values, and its cultural narratives.

The institutionalization of Thailand's contemporary soft-power policy accelerated on 13 September 2023, when the Cabinet approved the establishment of the National Committee for Soft Power Strategy. The committee was assigned to coordinate national efforts to use soft power to expand economic opportunities and income, reflecting a more integrated approach to cultural and creative development (Government Public Relations Department, 2023b).

A defining characteristic of the strategy is its close connection with the creative economy. Government policy increasingly presents cultural and creative industries as sources of employment, entrepreneurship, investment, intellectual property, exports, and tourism demand. This direction corresponds with international recognition of the creative economy as an important contributor to economic diversification and sustainable development (UNCTAD, 2024). More recently, Thailand's Intellectual Property Development Plan 2026–2027 has emphasized legal development, intellectual property protection, support for creative enterprises, and improved measurement of the creative economy, further demonstrating the integration of culture, creativity, and commercialization within national policy (Government Public Relations Department, 2026).

One of the most widely recognized elements of Thailand's early soft-power promotion was the "5F" framework: Food, Festival, Film, Fight, and Fashion. Food refers to Thai gastronomy and culinary knowledge; Festival includes traditional celebrations and cultural events; Film covers cinema, television, and creative content; Fight primarily represents Muay Thai; and Fashion encompasses Thai textiles, design, clothing, and accessories. These sectors provided clear and recognizable categories through which Thailand could connect cultural promotion, tourism experiences, and international marketing (Government Public Relations Department, 2023).

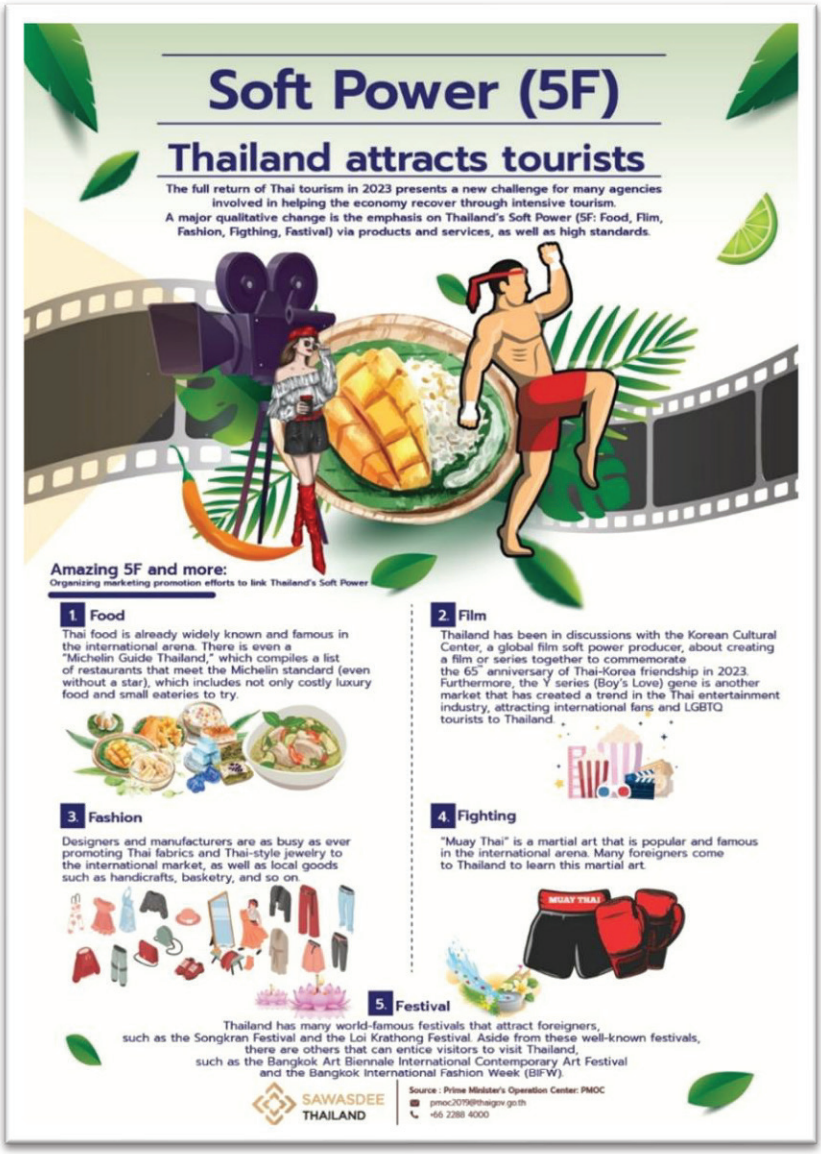


Figure 64. Soft Power (5F)
Source: thailand.go.th

The national strategy has subsequently expanded beyond the original 5F framework. By 2025, official policy identified 13 priority industries: tourism, food, film, fashion, festivals, sports, music, art, design, gaming, literature, wellness, and performing arts. This expansion reflects a broader understanding of Thailand's cultural and creative potential and recognizes the connections among tourism, entertainment, health, media, design, and cultural production (Government Public Relations Department, 2025).

Tourism occupies a particularly important position within this strategy because it enables direct engagement with Thai culture. Whereas films, music, fashion, and food products communicate cultural images across borders, tourism allows visitors to experience culture through places, people, practices, and services. Visitors encounter Thai cuisine, festivals, heritage sites, local communities, wellness traditions, creative activities, and hospitality firsthand. The Tourism Authority of Thailand's *Be My Guest* campaign, for example, combined culturally immersive travel routes with international content creators to promote Thai heritage, gastronomy, crafts, wellness, and local lifestyles. Such initiatives demonstrate how tourism can translate cultural attraction into destination awareness, emotional connection, visitor expenditure, and international advocacy (TAT, 2025).

Food, Muay Thai, and festivals remain among Thailand's most visible soft-power assets. Thai cuisine provides an accessible entry point through which international audiences experience the country's culture, ingredients, local knowledge,

and hospitality. Muay Thai combines sport, history, ritual, wellness, entertainment, and tourism through competitions, training camps, fitness programmes, and cultural activities. Festivals such as Songkran and Loi Krathong similarly communicate Thai identity through rituals, visual culture, hospitality, and community participation.

The inscription of Songkran in Thailand on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2023 further strengthened its international recognition. The inscription emphasizes merit-making, family reunion, respect for older people and ancestors, symbolic cleansing, and wishes for good fortune. These meanings demonstrate that Songkran's soft-power value extends beyond its popular water celebrations and depends on preserving its cultural and community foundations (UNESCO, 2023).

Human-capital development is another important component of the strategy. The One Family, One Soft Power initiative aims to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities to 20 million people by 2027 through more than 100 courses related to tourism, hospitality, design, digital media, wellness, film, fashion, and other creative sectors (Government Public Relations Department, 2025). This approach recognizes that cultural resources alone are insufficient. Successful soft-power development also requires skilled creators, entrepreneurs, performers, designers, cultural interpreters, and tourism professionals who can transform cultural knowledge into innovative products and meaningful experiences.

Despite its potential, Thailand's strategy faces several conceptual and governance challenges. Soft power cannot be generated solely through government campaigns because cultural attraction often develops organically through creative freedom, credible storytelling, community participation, and authentic cultural expression. Research cautions that Thailand's policy frequently emphasizes the commercialization of cultural products, whereas Nye's original concept focuses more broadly on attraction, legitimacy, values, and influence (Bunyavejchewin, 2026; Cogan, 2024).

A related concern is the risk of treating creative-economy growth and soft-power influence as equivalent. Cultural industries may create employment, exports, and tourism revenue without necessarily strengthening international trust or long-term influence. Top-down promotion may also privilege recognizable and marketable images of Thai culture while overlooking regional diversity, contemporary cultural expression, and the needs of cultural practitioners. Effective policy therefore requires collaboration among government agencies, communities, creative professionals, tourism businesses, educational institutions, and international partners (Moonsarn, 2025).

Measurement presents a further challenge. Tourism arrivals, exports, investment, employment, and revenue can be quantified relatively easily, whereas attraction, reputation, trust, cultural familiarity, and international influence are more difficult to assess. Evaluation should therefore combine economic indicators with evidence relating to destination image, cultural

engagement, international perceptions, digital reach, stakeholder participation, and the long-term sustainability of cultural industries.

Overall, Thailand's soft-power strategy represents an important evolution in national tourism and cultural policy. It recognizes that heritage, gastronomy, wellness, festivals, sport, media, creative industries, and hospitality can generate value beyond conventional tourism revenue. Its long-term success, however, will depend on balancing commercialization with cultural credibility, government coordination with creative freedom, national branding with regional diversity, and economic objectives with cultural sustainability. Thailand's central task is not simply to promote cultural products but to create meaningful cultural relationships that strengthen both national prosperity and international attraction.

4.2 National Tourism Policies

Tourism has long been one of Thailand's most important economic sectors, contributing to employment, foreign-exchange earnings, regional development, and international competitiveness. Over time, however, national tourism policy has shifted from a primary emphasis on visitor growth and infrastructure expansion toward quality, sustainability, resilience, innovation, and more equitable benefit distribution. This transition reflects the recognition that long-term tourism success depends not only on attracting visitors but also on protecting natural and cultural resources, improving community well-being,

and strengthening the capacity of destinations to respond to future disruption.

A major framework guiding this transition is the Third National Tourism Development Plan (2023–2027). Developed under the concept of *"Building Forward a Better Tourism for All,"* the plan adopts a triple-bottom-line approach centred on People, Profits, and Planet. These dimensions address social benefits and tourism standards, the development of a high-value tourism economy, and the protection of environmental and cultural resources. The plan is implemented through four strategic pillars: resilient tourism, quality tourism, tourism experience, and sustainable tourism (Ministry of Tourism and Sports [MOTS], 2023; OECD, 2026).

One of the most important policy changes is the movement from a quantity-based model toward value-based tourism. Rather than evaluating success only through visitor arrivals, the current approach emphasizes tourist expenditure, length of stay, quality of experience, local economic linkages, and the wider social and environmental value generated by tourism. The Tourism Authority of Thailand's Corporate Plan 2023–2027 similarly prioritizes high-value markets, high-quality tourism products, experience-based tourism, sustainability, technological development, and stronger tourism ecosystems (TAT, 2023).

This direction has continued through the 2026 *Thailand Tourism Next* strategy, which places greater emphasis on quality-led, balanced, and sustainable growth. Under the principle that value should be prioritized over volume, TAT seeks to increase

the contribution of each visit while reducing excessive dependence on continually expanding arrival numbers. This approach encourages longer stays, higher expenditure, niche markets, stronger local supply chains, and tourism experiences that generate meaningful benefits for both visitors and host communities (TAT, 2026).

Sustainability has consequently become a central pillar of national tourism policy. The Thailand Green Tourism Plan 2030 promotes sustainable standards for destinations, community enterprises, small accommodations, and tour operators through the Thailand Good Travel mark. Developed with reference to international sustainability criteria, the initiative addresses environmental protection alongside social, cultural, and economic responsibility. It also seeks to strengthen the capacity of tourism operators to meet international expectations and improve Thailand's competitiveness as a responsible destination (TAT, 2025).

The need for resilience became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the risks associated with dependence on a small number of international markets and highly concentrated tourism destinations. Contemporary policy therefore places greater emphasis on market diversification, domestic tourism, crisis preparedness, public health, safety, climate adaptation, and coordinated risk management. Regional and local authorities are expected to play increasingly important roles in addressing destination-specific threats such as flooding, extreme heat, environmental degradation, and infrastructure pressure (OECD, 2026).

Experience-based tourism represents another important policy priority. TAT's strategic vision positions the organization as a leader in driving Thailand toward experience-based and sustainable tourism. This orientation responds to growing demand for authentic, participatory, and emotionally engaging experiences rather than standardized sightseeing. Thailand's heritage, gastronomy, festivals, wellness traditions, crafts, creative industries, and community lifestyles provide a strong foundation for developing such experiences and differentiating the country from competing destinations (TAT, 2023).

The emphasis on cultural experiences also strengthens the relationship between tourism policy and soft power. Tourism enables visitors to engage directly with Thai culture through food, Muay Thai, festivals, film locations, traditional wellness, performing arts, and local communities. Recent campaigns have incorporated these assets into tourism promotion by using cultural storytelling and collaboration with content creators to communicate Thai identity to international audiences (TAT, 2025). Tourism policy therefore contributes not only to economic development but also to nation branding and the formation of international perceptions.

Digital transformation has also emerged as an important element of national tourism development. Digital platforms, smart tourism systems, artificial intelligence, data analytics, and integrated databases can improve destination management, visitor communication, safety, marketing, and resource allocation. Recent research proposes that Thailand's sustainable tourism transition should combine digital technologies with

green innovation, human-capital development, research, and supporting infrastructure (Manotungvorapun & Gerdsri, 2025). Nevertheless, digital development must remain inclusive because smaller businesses and communities may lack the skills, funding, or infrastructure needed to benefit equally from technological change.

Regional dispersal and equitable tourism are additional policy priorities. Tourism activity has traditionally been concentrated in Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, and other established destinations, contributing to congestion and unequal regional development. Current policies encourage travel to secondary destinations, weekday tourism, community-based tourism, and locally managed products. The emerging Equitable Tourism approach seeks to distribute visitors and income more evenly while strengthening domestic value chains and enabling communities to develop tourism based on local identities and resources (OECD, 2026).

Community participation is particularly important from the perspective of Cultural Capital Tourism Management. Cultural resources are embedded not only in monuments and attractions but also in local knowledge, traditions, foodways, crafts, social practices, and collective memory. Community-based tourism can provide local people with opportunities to interpret and manage these resources while retaining a greater share of tourism income. However, participation must extend beyond consultation to include meaningful involvement in decision-making, cultural interpretation, product development, benefit-sharing, and impact monitoring.

Despite these positive policy directions, implementation challenges remain. Responsibilities are distributed among the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Department of Tourism, TAT, Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration, local authorities, private-sector organizations, and communities. Effective implementation therefore requires clear coordination, reliable data, adequate funding, local capacity, and consistent monitoring. Gaps between national objectives and destination-level practices may otherwise allow overtourism, environmental degradation, cultural commodification, infrastructure constraints, and unequal benefits to persist.

The evolution of national tourism policy is significant because heritage, gastronomy, wellness, festivals, creative industries, and regional identities are increasingly regarded as strategic assets rather than supplementary attractions. Effective policy should ensure that these resources are identified, safeguarded, activated, and used to create value without weakening their authenticity or community foundations.

Overall, Thailand's national tourism policy has moved toward a more value-driven, sustainable, experience-based, and inclusive development model. The Third National Tourism Development Plan, TAT's corporate strategy, the Thailand Green Tourism Plan 2030, digital transformation initiatives, equitable tourism measures, and soft-power promotion collectively demonstrate this transition. Their long-term success will depend on translating national ambitions into coordinated local action that protects cultural capital, strengthens communities, improves visitor experiences, and builds a more resilient tourism sector.

4.3 Destination Image and Global Perceptions

Destination image is one of the most influential concepts in tourism because it shapes how potential visitors perceive, evaluate, and select destinations. It refers to the beliefs, impressions, emotions, and expectations associated with a particular place. Destination image influences travel decisions before a visit, affects how tourists interpret their experiences during the trip, and contributes to satisfaction, recommendations, and revisit intentions afterward (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Sodawan & Hsu, 2025).

Tourism scholars generally distinguish between cognitive and affective destination image. The cognitive dimension concerns tourists' knowledge and beliefs about destination attributes, including attractions, accessibility, accommodation, culture, safety, and service quality. The affective dimension reflects emotional responses, such as whether a destination is perceived as exciting, relaxing, welcoming, or enjoyable. Together, these dimensions shape tourists' overall evaluations and behavioural loyalty toward destinations (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Sodawan & Hsu, 2025). Recent research involving international visitors to Thailand confirms that cognitive and affective images contribute to intentions to revisit and recommend the country.

For Thailand, destination image represents one of the country's most valuable intangible tourism assets. Over several decades, Thailand has developed a strong international reputation based on cultural richness, hospitality, gastronomy, tropical landscapes, diverse tourism experiences, wellness services, and

perceived value for money. Research examining Chinese tourists' online travel narratives identified temples, Thai people, local lifestyles, food, restaurants, hospitality, and cultural experiences as prominent elements through which Thailand's image is constructed (Zhu & Shan, 2024).

The concept of *Thainess* plays an important role in this image. It broadly encompasses cultural distinctiveness, social warmth, friendliness, generosity, respect, and hospitality. These qualities support the long-standing representation of Thailand as the "Land of Smiles" and influence how visitors interpret their encounters with local people and service providers. However, *Thainess* should not be reduced to a fixed collection of images. It is expressed differently across Thailand's regions, communities, religions, lifestyles, and contemporary cultural practices.



Figure 65. Thainess's Vibe
Source: atmediaassets.com

Figure 65 reflects how Thailand's destination image is communicated through cultural atmosphere, hospitality, visual identity, and everyday interactions. Such representations can create an immediate emotional impression of friendliness and cultural warmth. Nevertheless, destination marketing should avoid presenting *Thainess* only through idealized or repetitive stereotypes. A credible destination image should communicate both Thailand's recognizable cultural values and the diversity of its contemporary society.

Cultural heritage is another important component of destination image formation. Temples, historical cities, royal heritage, festivals, crafts, performing arts, and traditional lifestyles contribute to perceptions of Thailand as culturally rich and distinctive. These resources differentiate the country from competing destinations while providing visitors with opportunities for learning, cultural immersion, and emotional connection. Their contribution to destination image, however, depends on effective conservation, interpretation, accessibility, and the quality of the visitor experience.

Gastronomy and wellness have also become influential image attributes. Thai cuisine communicates cultural identity through ingredients, preparation methods, regional variations, street-food environments, and social dining practices. Similarly, Thai massage, spa services, meditation, traditional medicine, and wellness retreats reinforce Thailand's image as a destination associated with relaxation, healing, and holistic well-being. Thailand's current tourism strategy consequently presents gastronomy, wellness, cultural immersion, and locally grounded

experiences as important elements of its evolving international tourism identity (TAT, 2025).

Destination image is not uniform across international markets. Tourists' perceptions may differ according to nationality, cultural background, motivation, age, previous visits, media exposure, and familiarity with the destination. Chinese tourists, for example, have associated Thailand with temples, cuisine, friendly people, convenient tourism services, modern lifestyles, and opportunities for personal exploration (Zhu & Shan, 2024). TAT has consequently used market-specific initiatives such as *Sawasdee Nihao* to reposition Thailand in the Chinese market around hospitality, quality, cultural experiences, convenience, and safety (TAT, 2025).

Safety has become a particularly important dimension of destination image. Concerns relating to crime, transport, health, political instability, fraud, and crisis management may influence tourists' confidence even when other destination attributes remain attractive. Awais-E-Yazdan et al. (2025) found that perceived safety was positively associated with tourists' future behavioural intentions in Thailand and that destination image strengthened this relationship. These findings demonstrate that safety communication and visitor protection are integral to image management rather than separate operational issues.

The relationship between destination image and soft power is also increasingly significant. Tourism enables international visitors to encounter a country's cultural values, lifestyles, creativity, and social practices directly. Positive experiences may influence not only destination loyalty but also

wider perceptions of Thailand as a nation. Thai cuisine, festivals, Muay Thai, wellness, film, fashion, heritage, and hospitality can therefore strengthen both tourism image and cultural attractiveness. TAT's 2026 strategy explicitly links Thailand's cultural identity and soft power with emotionally engaging, authentic, and value-led tourism experiences (TAT, 2025).

Digital media has fundamentally changed how destination image is formed and communicated. Social media, online reviews, travel blogs, short-form videos, and user-generated content allow tourists to share experiences with large international audiences. Destination image is therefore no longer controlled exclusively by government agencies or tourism businesses. It is continuously co-created by visitors, residents, influencers, media organizations, and online communities. Zhu and Shan's (2024) analysis of Chinese travelogues demonstrates how online narratives communicate expectations, experiences, emotions, and interpretations of Thailand while influencing the perceptions of prospective visitors.

Digital communication creates opportunities for rapid visibility, personalized storytelling, and engagement with specialised market segments. At the same time, negative incidents, misinformation, overcrowding, environmental damage, or inappropriate visitor behaviour can circulate quickly and harm destination reputation. Destination image management therefore requires continuous monitoring, accurate communication, rapid crisis response, and cooperation among public agencies, tourism businesses, communities, and content creators.

Despite Thailand's generally strong international image, several challenges remain. Environmental degradation, overtourism, safety concerns, inconsistent service quality, and cultural commodification can create a gap between promoted images and actual visitor experiences. Destination branding must therefore balance familiar cultural images with emerging values related to sustainability, creativity, safety, inclusivity, innovation, and wellness. Thailand's current policy direction reflects this challenge by shifting from image restoration and visitor volume toward trust, authentic connection, quality experiences, and long-term value (TAT, 2025).

Destination image can be understood as a strategic outcome of cultural capital. Heritage, gastronomy, festivals, wellness traditions, hospitality, regional identities, and creative industries generate symbolic meanings that influence destination choice and international reputation. However, cultural resources produce a positive image only when they are effectively safeguarded, interpreted, communicated, and transformed into credible visitor experiences.

Overall, Thailand's destination image remains one of its most important toursm and soft-power assets. Its strength derives from the combination of cultural richness, hospitality, gastronomy, wellness, natural landscapes, and diverse tourism experiences. In an increasingly competitive and digitally connected environment, effective destination image management requires consistency between communication and reality, market-sensitive strategies, visitor safety, cultural authenticity, and responsible tourism development.

4.4 Cultural Diplomacy Through Tourism

Cultural diplomacy has become an increasingly important dimension of international relations. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which primarily involves formal interactions between governments, cultural diplomacy emphasizes cultural exchange, people-to-people connections, mutual understanding, and long-term relationship building. Through cultural diplomacy, countries communicate their identities, values, traditions, and cultural achievements to international audiences while creating opportunities for dialogue and cooperation (Cull, 2019; Grincheva, 2024).

Tourism represents an effective mechanism for cultural diplomacy because it enables visitors to experience another society directly. Interactions with local communities, cultural institutions, tourism businesses, heritage resources, and everyday ways of life can encourage cultural learning and influence perceptions of a destination and its people. Tourism therefore extends cultural diplomacy beyond official exhibitions and government programmes by incorporating cultural exchange into ordinary visitor experiences.

The scale of international tourism strengthens this diplomatic potential. Approximately 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded worldwide in 2024, indicating that tourism had returned to approximately 99% of its pre-pandemic level (UN Tourism, 2025). Each international journey creates opportunities for cultural encounters that may influence destination image, national reputation, and relationships between societies. Tourism can therefore function as an important

component of public diplomacy and soft power when cultural attraction produces familiarity, goodwill, and sustained international interest (Nye, 2004).

For Thailand, tourism has long served as an informal instrument of cultural diplomacy. International visitors encounter Thai culture through heritage sites, religious traditions, festivals, gastronomy, wellness practices, performing arts, local communities, and hospitality. These encounters communicate aspects of Thai identity that may be more memorable and personally meaningful than formal promotional messages. Thailand's cultural diplomacy has historically connected cultural performances, food, Muay Thai, and tourism promotion, although stronger mutual exchange and greater inclusion of contemporary culture remain necessary (Prasirtsuk, 2024).

Heritage tourism provides an important platform for communicating Thailand's historical development and cultural achievements. Sites such as the Historic City of Ayutthaya and the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns allow visitors to engage with architecture, religion, artistic traditions, and narratives of Thai civilization. Museums, temples, cultural landscapes, and heritage interpretation can promote cultural understanding when they provide historically accurate and inclusive accounts rather than presenting heritage only as a visual attraction.

Festivals similarly support cultural diplomacy by enabling visitors to participate in living traditions. Songkran, for example, communicates cultural values associated with family reunion, respect for older adults and ancestors, merit-making,

community cooperation, forgiveness, and symbolic renewal. Its inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2023 increased its international visibility while reinforcing the need to safeguard its cultural meaning and community foundations (UNESCO, 2023).

Gastronomy constitutes one of Thailand's most recognizable instruments of cultural diplomacy. Thai cuisine communicates regional diversity, historical interaction, local ingredients, culinary knowledge, and social values through direct sensory experiences. Thailand is widely regarded as an early practitioner of gastrodiplomacy through initiatives that promoted Thai restaurants and cuisine internationally. These efforts increased global familiarity with Thai culture while supporting food exports, national branding, and culinary tourism (Prasirtsuk, 2024; Rockower, 2012).

Wellness tourism provides another avenue for communicating Thai culture. Traditional Thai massage, herbal knowledge, meditation, spiritual practices, and holistic approaches to well-being expose visitors to cultural perspectives on healing, balance, and mindful living. These traditions have contributed to Thailand's international recognition as a wellness destination and illustrate how local knowledge can generate both tourism and cultural-diplomacy value (Global Wellness Institute, 2026).

Educational and community-based tourism can deepen this form of exchange. Homestays, craft workshops, cooking activities, language learning, cultural immersion, and community-guided experiences allow visitors and residents to

interact more closely. Such experiences can generate more nuanced cultural understanding than conventional sightseeing, particularly when local communities determine how their identities and traditions are interpreted and shared.

Digital media has expanded cultural diplomacy beyond the physical journey. Visitors increasingly share their experiences through social media, travel blogs, online reviews, photographs, and videos. These narratives reach audiences who may never have visited Thailand and can influence perceptions of Thai culture and destination image. Tourists therefore function not only as cultural participants but also as informal cultural communicators. Research on online travel narratives about Thailand demonstrates that user-generated content actively shapes how prospective visitors understand the country's people, food, lifestyles, attractions, and hospitality (Zhu & Shan, 2024).

However, cultural diplomacy through tourism also presents challenges. Tourism representations may simplify cultural diversity, reproduce stereotypes, or prioritize the aspects of culture that are easiest to market. Festivals, performances, crafts, and local lifestyles may be modified to meet visitor expectations, potentially weakening cultural meanings and community control. Cultural diplomacy should therefore promote dialogue and reciprocal learning rather than relying only on one-way presentations of idealized national culture (Grincheva, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

Balancing tourism promotion with cultural safeguarding is consequently essential. Communities and cultural practitioners should participate in decisions concerning interpretation,

commercialization, visitor access, and benefit distribution. Cultural diplomacy becomes more credible when local people are treated as active partners and knowledge holders rather than as performers or objects of tourism consumption.

It can be said that cultural diplomacy represents a mechanism through which cultural resources generate international influence. Heritage, festivals, gastronomy, wellness traditions, hospitality, and community practices contribute to tourism development while also shaping Thailand's international reputation. Tourism provides the experiential platform through which these resources are communicated, interpreted, and shared with global audiences.

Hence, cultural diplomacy through tourism demonstrates that tourism is more than an economic activity. It is also a process of cultural communication, relationship building, and intercultural engagement. For Thailand, its effectiveness will depend on providing authentic and meaningful experiences, supporting community participation, embracing contemporary as well as traditional culture, and balancing international promotion with cultural sustainability.

4.5 Soft Power Competitiveness

In an increasingly interconnected world, countries compete not only through economic strength, military capabilities, and technological development but also through their capacity to attract, inspire, and influence international audiences. Soft power can support national competitiveness by strengthening reputation, increasing cultural visibility, and creating favourable conditions for tourism, investment, education, business partnerships, and international cooperation. Nye (2004) explains that this form of influence is generated through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment.

Soft power competitiveness may therefore be understood as a country's capacity to convert its culture, values, reputation, governance, education, innovation, diplomacy, and international engagement into attraction and influence. In tourism, this capacity is particularly important because destination choice is strongly affected by cultural appeal, perceived safety, destination image, service quality, and expectations of meaningful experiences. Tourism can consequently function as both an outcome of national attractiveness and a mechanism through which that attractiveness is reinforced.

The Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index provides one widely used assessment of how countries are perceived internationally. Its 2026 edition was based on responses from more than 150,000 participants in over 100 countries and assessed all 193 United Nations member states across 55 indicators. These indicators include familiarity, reputation,

influence, culture and heritage, governance, international relations, business and trade, education, media, sustainability, and people and values (Brand Finance, 2026).

According to the Global Soft Power Index 2026, Thailand ranked 38th globally with a score of 45.0 out of 100, improving by one position from 39th in 2025. Thailand ranked seventh for both *"food the world loves"* and *"fun"* as well as 12th for being perceived as *"a great place to visit"*. These results demonstrate that gastronomy, leisure, and tourism remain among Thailand's strongest sources of international attraction (Brand Finance, 2026).

Gastronomy represents a particularly important competitive advantage. Thai cuisine is widely available internationally and provides an accessible way for global audiences to engage with Thai culture. Restaurants, street food, culinary media, cooking classes, regional cuisines, and gastronomic tourism communicate cultural knowledge while supporting tourism, food exports, entrepreneurship, and national branding. Thailand's high international ranking for food suggests that cuisine generates both economic value and positive cultural familiarity.

Tourism itself functions as both a driver and an expression of soft power competitiveness. International visitors encounter Thailand through heritage, gastronomy, festivals, wellness, Muay Thai, creative industries, hospitality, and local lifestyles. These direct experiences can create emotional connections that are more influential than conventional

destination advertising. Thailand's strong ranking as a place to visit therefore reflects not only the attractiveness of its tourism resources but also the international familiarity produced through repeated travel and shared visitor experiences.

This relationship is reflected in Thailand's current tourism strategy. Under the *"Value is the New Volume"* and *"New Thailand"* directions, tourism promotion increasingly emphasizes meaningful experiences, wellness, sustainability, cultural identity, emotional storytelling, and benefits for local communities. TAT has positioned Thai hospitality, gastronomy, culture, and local connections as foundations for quality-led tourism and international competitiveness (TAT, 2025, 2026).

Thailand's broader cultural capital provides an important foundation for this competitiveness. Historical cities, Buddhist heritage, traditional festivals, regional cuisines, wellness practices, Muay Thai, crafts, film, performing arts, and creative industries possess symbolic and experiential qualities that are difficult for competing destinations to reproduce. However, cultural resources do not automatically generate soft power. They must be safeguarded, interpreted, communicated, and transformed into credible products, narratives, and experiences that are meaningful to international audiences.

Thailand's national strategy seeks to strengthen this transformation through 13 priority industries: tourism, food, film, fashion, festivals, sports, music, art, design, gaming, literature, wellness, and performing arts. These sectors demonstrate that soft power competitiveness increasingly depends on connections among cultural heritage, creative

production, skilled human resources, intellectual property, technology, tourism, and international distribution (Government Public Relations Department, 2025).

The experiences of South Korea and Japan illustrate the importance of developing strong cultural-production ecosystems. South Korea's international influence has been supported by globally distributed music, television, film, beauty products, and digital content. In 2026, the country rose to 11th place in the Global Soft Power Index, with its performance strengthened by cultural and media visibility. Japan has similarly combined traditional culture with cuisine, animation, design, technology, and popular entertainment to maintain international recognition. These examples suggest that long-term competitiveness requires continuous investment in cultural production, professional skills, distribution networks, innovation, and international audience engagement (Brand Finance, 2026).

Digital transformation has intensified this competition. Streaming platforms, social media, online communities, influencers, and user-generated content enable cultural products and tourism experiences to reach international audiences rapidly. Initiatives such as TAT's *Be My Guest* campaign combine cultural immersion with collaboration between Thai and international creators, allowing heritage, food, crafts, wellness, and local lifestyles to be communicated through contemporary digital storytelling (TAT, 2025). However, increased digital visibility also exposes countries to rapid reputational change, misinformation, negative visitor experiences, and intense competition for public attention.

Despite Thailand's strengths, several limitations affect its soft power competitiveness. Its international appeal remains strongly concentrated in tourism, gastronomy, hospitality, and leisure. These assets are valuable, but long-term competitiveness would benefit from stronger international performance in education, research, technology, innovation, media production, environmental leadership, and creative intellectual property. Furthermore, soft power depends on consistency between promoted images and lived realities. Safety concerns, environmental degradation, poor destination management, unequal tourism benefits, or restrictions on creative expression may weaken credibility and international trust.

Measurement presents an additional challenge. Rankings such as the Global Soft Power Index provide useful comparative evidence, but soft power cannot be evaluated through a single score. Reputation and attraction vary across countries, market segments, generations, and political contexts. Thailand should therefore combine international indices with destination-image research, visitor surveys, digital sentiment analysis, cultural-export performance, international media reach, stakeholder outcomes, and evidence of sustained cultural engagement.

From the perspective of Cultural Capital Tourism Management, soft power competitiveness is an outcome of successfully converting cultural capital into international attraction without undermining cultural integrity. Tangible heritage, intangible traditions, creative industries, gastronomy, wellness, hospitality, and tourism experiences collectively contribute to Thailand's international image. Tourism provides a

major platform through which these assets are experienced, interpreted, and communicated to global audiences.

Overall, Thailand possesses a strong foundation for soft power competitiveness through its cultural richness, tourism appeal, gastronomy, hospitality, wellness, and creative potential. Its improvement to 38th place in the Global Soft Power Index 2026 indicates continued international recognition, particularly in food, leisure, and tourism. Strengthening this position will require cultural safeguarding, creative innovation, human-capital development, digital capability, sustainability, and greater diversification beyond established tourism images. Thailand's future competitiveness will depend not only on how effectively it promotes its culture, but also on whether its cultural offerings remain credible, inclusive, innovative, and internationally meaningful.

4.6 Future Opportunities and Challenges

As Thailand advances its soft power agenda, the relationship among tourism, cultural capital, and international influence presents both significant opportunities and complex challenges. The country's heritage, cuisine, wellness traditions, creative industries, regional identities, and established tourism infrastructure provide a strong foundation for enhancing international attractiveness. However, transforming these assets into long-term value requires careful attention to authenticity, sustainability, innovation, community participation, governance, and increasing global competition.

One of the most promising opportunities lies in the closer integration of tourism and the creative economy. Thailand's official soft power framework identifies 13 priority industries: tourism, food, film, fashion, festivals, sports, music, art, design, gaming, literature, wellness, and performing arts (Government Public Relations Department, 2025). Connecting these industries can generate new tourism products, strengthen cultural entrepreneurship, expand creative employment, and create experiences with greater economic and symbolic value. This direction also reflects international recognition that creative industries can support trade, innovation, employment, and economic diversification (UNCTAD, 2024).

Experience-based tourism offers another important opportunity. Contemporary visitors increasingly seek meaningful participation, personal enrichment, and interaction with local people rather than standardized sightseeing. Thailand's gastronomy, festivals, crafts, performing arts, wellness

knowledge, and community lifestyles are well suited to this demand. The country's current tourism direction, expressed through the principle *"Value is the New Volume,"* similarly emphasizes quality, balance, cultural connection, and greater value per visit rather than continuous growth in visitor numbers (TAT, 2025, 2026).

Digital transformation can further expand Thailand's cultural reach. Social media, streaming services, virtual experiences, digital storytelling, and creator networks allow cultural products and tourism destinations to communicate directly with international audiences. TAT's *Be My Guest* campaign, for example, brought together Thai and international creators to present local culture, gastronomy, crafts, wellness, and sustainable tourism through digital content (TAT, 2025). Digital platforms can also increase the visibility of smaller communities and emerging destinations that receive limited exposure through conventional tourism marketing.

Regional tourism development provides an additional pathway for growth. Thailand's secondary cities and rural communities possess distinctive food traditions, festivals, crafts, ethnic cultures, historical resources, and local knowledge that remain underrepresented in national tourism promotion. The country's emerging Equitable Tourism approach seeks to distribute visitors and tourism income more widely while strengthening local supply chains and community-based value creation (OECD, 2026). Such an approach can reduce pressure on established destinations while presenting Thailand's regional diversity as a source of competitive advantage.

The expanding global wellness economy also presents considerable potential. Thailand's wellness market increased from USD 38.8 billion in 2023 to USD 42.7 billion in 2024, reflecting strong growth in areas such as traditional therapies, spa services, medical wellness, healthy lifestyles, and preventive care (Global Wellness Institute, 2026). By integrating Thai massage, herbal knowledge, meditation, nature-based activities, gastronomy, and hospitality, Thailand can develop wellness experiences that are both internationally competitive and culturally distinctive.

Despite these opportunities, cultural commodification remains a major concern. When festivals, rituals, crafts, cuisines, or community identities are adapted primarily to satisfy tourism markets, their meanings may be simplified or separated from their social and cultural foundations. Commercialization can support cultural practitioners and knowledge transmission, but excessive market influence may weaken authenticity and community control (Wang et al., 2024). Sustainable soft power development therefore requires communities to participate in decisions concerning cultural representation, interpretation, commercial use, and benefit distribution.

Another challenge concerns the relationship between state-led policy and grassroots creativity. Thailand's strategy has created clearer national priorities and opportunities for training and promotion. Nevertheless, Moonsarn (2025) argues that an overly instrumental and bureaucratic approach may restrict cultural experimentation and privilege traditional or officially approved cultural forms over contemporary and alternative

expressions. Soft power is unlikely to develop sustainably when culture is produced only to satisfy government targets or promotional campaigns. Local creators and communities require space, resources, and freedom to generate cultural expressions that audiences find credible and meaningful.

Tourism sustainability represents a further challenge. Concentrated visitor flows can produce congestion, waste, environmental degradation, rising costs, and infrastructure pressure in established destinations. Digital visibility may intensify these effects by rapidly directing visitors toward previously unknown or environmentally fragile places. Thailand must therefore combine tourism promotion with carrying-capacity assessment, visitor dispersal, environmental monitoring, climate adaptation, and investment in local infrastructure. Its value-oriented tourism strategy will be credible only when economic benefits are accompanied by measurable improvements in environmental and community outcomes.

International competition is also becoming more intense. Countries across Asia are investing in film, music, cuisine, design, gaming, digital media, cultural events, and creative exports to capture global attention. Thailand must therefore move beyond relying primarily on its established reputation for food, hospitality, and leisure. Continued competitiveness will require stronger cultural-production systems, intellectual-property protection, professional training, international distribution, research, technology, and collaboration between tourism and creative industries.

A related challenge is maintaining a coherent but inclusive international image. Thailand's soft power extends across many sectors, but disconnected campaigns may present separate cultural products without communicating a broader national narrative. Greater coordination among tourism, cultural diplomacy, creative industries, education, trade, and destination branding could strengthen international recognition. However, coherence should not result in cultural uniformity. National communication must continue to represent Lanna, Isan, Southern, Central, borderland, ethnic, and contemporary urban cultures as important parts of Thailand's identity.

Human-capital development will be essential to addressing these challenges. The One Family, One Soft Power initiative aims to provide training to 20 million people by 2027 through more than 100 courses across Thailand's priority creative industries (Government Public Relations Department, 2025). Building capabilities in storytelling, design, digital production, hospitality, wellness, entrepreneurship, language, cultural interpretation, and sustainable tourism can enable people to transform cultural knowledge into competitive products and experiences. However, training should be connected with employment, financing, market access, mentoring, and long-term support rather than measured only by participation numbers.

Effective governance will ultimately determine whether these opportunities generate sustainable benefits. Thailand's soft power tourism strategy involves government agencies, local authorities, cultural institutions, tourism businesses, educational organizations, creative professionals, and communities. Clear responsibilities, reliable data, coordinated funding, community representation, and transparent evaluation are therefore necessary. Assessment should consider not only tourism revenue and cultural exports but also community benefits, cultural continuity, environmental effects, international perceptions, and the capacity of local creators to participate in development.

Chapter 5
Heritage, Festivals, and Cultural Tourism

5.1 Heritage Tourism

Heritage tourism has become an important segment of contemporary tourism, reflecting growing interest in history, identity, culture, and meaningful travel experiences. As destinations increasingly compete through cultural distinctiveness rather than price alone, heritage resources have become strategic assets that contribute to destination attractiveness, community identity, economic development, and soft power. Heritage tourism therefore involves more than visiting historical sites; it also concerns how societies identify, safeguard, interpret, and present their cultural resources to contemporary audiences.

Heritage tourism may be understood as travel motivated wholly or partly by an interest in experiencing cultural heritage. Its resources include monuments, archaeological sites, historic buildings, museums, religious places, cultural landscapes, festivals, performing arts, traditional craftsmanship, gastronomy, and local ways of life. This scope incorporates both tangible heritage and intangible, or living, heritage. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their heritage and continuously transmit and recreate across generations (UNESCO, 2003).

Interest in heritage tourism has expanded alongside demand for distinctive, educational, and culturally grounded experiences. Digital media has also increased the visibility of heritage destinations and enabled potential visitors to access historical information, virtual interpretation, and user-generated travel narratives before visiting. Cultural and heritage tourism consequently provide destinations with opportunities to communicate their identities while developing products that cannot easily be reproduced elsewhere.

From an economic perspective, heritage sites can function as anchor attractions that support accommodation, transport, gastronomy, guiding, retail, crafts, and other local services. Their value, however, should not be assessed only through visitor numbers or tourism revenue. Heritage tourism may also provide resources for conservation, create employment, strengthen community pride, and support the transmission of cultural knowledge. UNESCO's approach therefore integrates heritage protection and tourism planning at the destination level through stakeholder cooperation, balanced participation, and community empowerment (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

The concept of heritage itself has evolved. Earlier approaches often concentrated on monumental architecture, archaeological remains, museums, and objects associated with the past. Contemporary perspectives recognize that heritage also includes living practices, knowledge systems, memories, cultural meanings, and relationships between communities and places. Tangible and intangible heritage are closely connected because

monuments and cultural landscapes often derive their significance from the rituals, beliefs, stories, and knowledge associated with them.

Within the Cultural Capital Tourism Management framework, heritage represents an accumulated form of cultural capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theory, heritage resources possess symbolic, social, and educational value that can be converted into tourism and economic outcomes. Throsby (2001) similarly explains that cultural capital possesses both cultural and economic value. Heritage tourism illustrates this duality because historic places and living traditions may retain cultural meaning while simultaneously contributing to employment, destination image, visitor expenditure, and regional development.

Heritage resources can provide competitive advantages because they are place-specific and difficult to imitate. Nevertheless, their tourism value depends on more than their physical existence. Conservation quality, accessibility, interpretation, storytelling, service provision, and community involvement all influence how visitors experience heritage. Recent research shows that perceived authenticity and visitor involvement strengthen destination image, experience quality, satisfaction, recommendations, and willingness to revisit or pay more (Uslu et al., 2024).

Contemporary heritage tourism therefore places increasing emphasis on experience. Visitors may still value observation and historical information, but many also seek participation, emotional connection, learning, and interaction with local people. This development reflects the experience

economy, in which value is created through memorable engagement rather than through the consumption of services alone (Pine & Gilmore, 2019). Craft workshops, cultural performances, traditional cooking, guided storytelling, archaeological interpretation, and community-led activities can help visitors develop deeper understandings of heritage.

This experiential orientation has contributed to concepts such as living heritage, experiential heritage tourism, and creative heritage tourism. Living heritage emphasizes that traditions are continuously practiced and adapted rather than preserved in an unchanging form. Experiential heritage tourism focuses on immersion and interpretation, while creative approaches allow visitors to participate in cultural production. However, participation should not transform cultural practices into performances designed solely to satisfy tourists. Communities must retain authority over how their histories, traditions, and identities are presented.

Authenticity is especially important in this context. It should not be understood simply as preserving heritage exactly as it existed in the past. Rather, authenticity concerns the credibility of cultural meaning, historical relationships, community recognition, and continuity. Research from the perspective of residents indicates that perceived heritage authenticity can strengthen local identity, cultural self-improvement, and responsibility for heritage protection (Yi et al., 2024).

Despite its benefits, heritage tourism faces substantial challenges. Overtourism, congestion, inappropriate development,

commercialization, pollution, insufficient conservation funding, and cultural commodification may damage heritage resources and reduce residents' quality of life. A recent review of heritage tourism research identifies sustainability, conservation, authenticity, visitor experience, and place attachment as increasingly important themes, indicating a broader movement away from growth-focused evaluation toward long-term heritage stewardship (Geçikli et al., 2024).

Climate change creates additional risks. Flooding, rising temperatures, extreme weather, coastal erosion, fire, moisture, and changing environmental conditions may threaten monuments, archaeological sites, historic settlements, and cultural landscapes. UNESCO's 2023 *Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage* calls for climate risks to be incorporated into conservation planning, adaptation, disaster preparedness, monitoring, and heritage governance (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023).

Sustainable heritage tourism must therefore balance conservation, visitor experience, community well-being, and economic development. This requires visitor-flow management, heritage impact assessments, interpretation standards, appropriate infrastructure, climate adaptation, and continuous monitoring. Community participation is particularly important because residents and cultural practitioners possess knowledge that cannot be separated from the heritage itself. UNESCO consequently emphasizes destination-level cooperation and meaningful community involvement in tourism and heritage management (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Thailand provides a valuable context for examining these opportunities and challenges. Its heritage portfolio includes historic cities, archaeological sites, Buddhist monuments, sacred landscapes, museums, royal heritage, festivals, performing arts, crafts, cuisine, and diverse community traditions. The Historic City of Ayutthaya and the Historic Town of Sukhothai communicate major periods of Thai political, religious, and architectural development, while Ban Chiang provides important evidence of prehistoric settlement, agriculture, and metal production in Southeast Asia.

More recent World Heritage inscriptions have expanded the international visibility of Thailand's cultural history. The Ancient Town of Si Thep and its Associated Dvaravati Monuments, inscribed in 2023, represent the artistic traditions and religious diversity of Dvaravati culture. Phu Phrabat, inscribed in 2024, illustrates the relationship between sacred landscapes and the Sīma stone tradition of the Dvaravati period. These recognitions create tourism opportunities but also require conservation planning, community engagement, sustainable visitor management, and protection from climate and development pressures.

From the perspective of Cultural Capital Tourism Management, Thailand's heritage should not be treated simply as a collection of attractions. It represents a living strategic resource that connects cultural identity, education, community development, tourism competitiveness, and international influence. Effective management must ensure that economic use

strengthens rather than replaces cultural meaning and that tourism benefits support conservation and local communities.

Overall, heritage tourism represents a critical intersection among culture, tourism, and sustainable development. It transforms tangible and intangible cultural resources into educational, emotional, and participatory experiences while generating economic and symbolic value. For Thailand, the long-term success of heritage tourism will depend on balancing access with preservation, innovation with authenticity, and international visibility with community ownership. When managed responsibly, heritage tourism can protect cultural capital, strengthen destination competitiveness, and enhance Thailand's cultural influence.

5.2.1 World Heritage Sites in Thailand

Thailand accepted the World Heritage Convention on 17 September 1987. As of July 2026, the country has eight properties inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List: five cultural sites and three natural sites. The cultural properties comprise the Historic City of Ayutthaya, the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns, the Ban Chiang Archaeological Site, the Ancient Town of Si Thep and its Associated Dvaravati Monuments, and Phu Phrabat. The natural properties are the Thungyai–Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries, the Dong Phayayen–Khao Yai Forest Complex, and the Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Thailand's first World Heritage inscriptions occurred in 1991, when the Historic City of Ayutthaya, the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns, and the Thungyai–Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries were added to the List. The country's newest World Heritage property is Phu Phrabat, inscribed in 2024 as a cultural landscape representing the Sīma stone tradition of the Dvaravati period. The site preserves the world's largest collection of Dvaravati-period Sīma stones in their original locations and demonstrates the long-standing transformation of the natural landscape for Buddhist religious purposes (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2024).

From a cultural tourism perspective, the Historic City of Ayutthaya, the Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns, and the Ban Chiang Archaeological Site are particularly important because they represent different stages of Thailand's historical and cultural development. These sites communicate the country's prehistoric heritage, early urban civilizations, religious traditions, artistic achievements, and political history while serving as significant resources for heritage education, destination image, and cultural tourism.

5.2.1.1 Historic City of Ayutthaya

The Historic City of Ayutthaya was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1991. Founded in 1350, Ayutthaya served as the capital of the Kingdom of Siam for more than four centuries and developed into one of Asia's most important political, economic, and cultural centers. The archaeological remains of temples, palaces,

monasteries, and fortifications provide evidence of a highly sophisticated civilization that played a significant role in regional trade and diplomacy.

Today, Ayutthaya functions as one of Thailand's most important heritage tourism destinations. Visitors are attracted by its monumental architecture, historical significance, religious heritage, and cultural landscapes. From a cultural capital perspective, Ayutthaya represents a tangible manifestation of Thailand's historical identity and contributes significantly to the country's tourism competitiveness and international image.

5.2.1.2 Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns

The Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns was also inscribed in 1991. Sukhothai is widely regarded as the first major Thai kingdom and is frequently associated with the origins of Thai art, architecture, governance, and cultural identity. The site includes the historic towns of Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, and Kamphaeng Phet, which collectively illustrate the development of early Thai civilization.

The significance of Sukhothai extends beyond archaeology. For many Thais, the site symbolizes the emergence of Thai statehood and cultural identity. Consequently, it functions not only as a tourism attraction but also as a place of national memory and cultural significance.

5.2.1.3 Ban Chiang Archaeological Site

The Ban Chiang Archaeological Site was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1992. Located in northeastern Thailand, Ban Chiang is one of Southeast Asia's most important prehistoric archaeological sites. The site contains evidence of early agriculture, metallurgy, pottery production, and community development dating back several thousand years. Its distinctive red-painted pottery has become an iconic symbol of prehistoric culture in the region.

Although Ban Chiang receives fewer visitors than Ayutthaya or Sukhothai, it remains an important heritage resource because it contributes to understanding the long-term development of human civilization in Southeast Asia.

5.2.2 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage programme recognizes living cultural expressions, knowledge, skills, rituals, social practices, and performing arts that communities identify as part of their cultural heritage. Unlike monuments or historic buildings, intangible cultural heritage is transmitted and continuously recreated by communities in response to changing social and environmental conditions. Its safeguarding therefore emphasizes cultural continuity, community participation, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (UNESCO, 2003).

Thailand ratified the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in June 2016. As of July 2026, Thailand has six elements inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity: *Khon, Masked Dance Drama in Thailand* (2018); *Nuad Thai, Traditional Thai Massage* (2019); *Nora, Dance Drama in Southern Thailand* (2021); *Songkran in Thailand, Traditional Thai New Year Festival* (2023); *Tomyum Kung* (2024); and *Kebaya: Knowledge, Skills, Traditions and Practices* (2024), which was jointly nominated with Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2026).

These inscriptions reflect the diversity of Thailand's living heritage across performing arts, traditional healthcare, festivals, gastronomy, craftsmanship, and shared Southeast Asian cultural traditions. They also enhance the international visibility of Thai culture and create opportunities for cultural tourism, education, community development, and soft power. However, UNESCO recognition also requires continued safeguarding to ensure that increased tourism and commercialization do not weaken community ownership or cultural meaning.

5.2.2.1 Khon (2018)

Khon, Thailand's classical masked dance drama, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2018 **(Figure 66)**. The performance integrates dance, vocal and instrumental music, literature, ritual, costume-making, mask-making, and other forms of traditional craftsmanship. Its narratives are primarily drawn from the *Ramakien*, Thailand's adaptation of the *Ramayana*, and commonly portray the conflict between Rama and Thosakan as a symbolic struggle between order and disorder, justice and wrongdoing (UNESCO, 2018).

Khon also performs an educational and cultural function by communicating moral principles, respect, social responsibility, and continuity with the past. Although the tradition was historically transmitted through royal courts and the households of dance masters, contemporary transmission increasingly takes place through educational institutions, training programmes, and performance clubs. UNESCO recognition has strengthened the international visibility of Khon while reinforcing the importance of safeguarding its performance knowledge, artistic skills, rituals, and associated craftsmanship for future generations (UNESCO, 2018).



Figure 66. Khon, Thai Masked Dance Drama
Source: sanook.com

5.2.2.2 Nuad Thai (2019)

Nuad Thai, or traditional Thai massage, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019. It is regarded as part of the art, science, and culture of traditional Thai healthcare. As a non-medicinal form of therapy, Nuad Thai **(Figure 67)** uses bodily manipulation to restore balance in the body's energy, structure, and four elements—earth, water, wind, and fire. Its practice is closely associated with knowledge of *sen*, or energy pathways believed to run throughout the human body (UNESCO, 2019).

The tradition involves more than therapeutic techniques. It incorporates knowledge transmission, professional ethics, respect for teachers, and relationships between practitioners and recipients. Historically rooted in community self-care, Nuad Thai is now transmitted through families, professional practitioners, educational institutions, and traditional medicine organizations. UNESCO recognition has enhanced its international visibility while emphasizing the need to safeguard the knowledge, values, and cultural practices associated with it (UNESCO, 2019).



Figure 67. Nuad Thai (Thai Massage)
Source: hdmall.co.th and fastwork.co

Beyond its cultural and therapeutic significance, Nuad Thai contributes substantially to Thailand's wellness destination image. Traditional massage, herbal treatments, spa services, meditation, and other holistic practices are increasingly integrated into tourism experiences. Thailand ranked 15th globally for wellness tourism in 2024, with wellness-tourism expenditure reaching approximately USD 14 billion, demonstrating the growing economic importance of culturally grounded wellness services (Global Wellness Institute, 2026).

5.2.2.3 Nora (2021)

Nora, a traditional dance drama originating in Southern Thailand, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021. It is a lively and acrobatic form of dance theatre that combines stylized movement, improvisational singing, rhythmic music, storytelling, and ritual practices. Performers are distinguished by colourful costumes, crown-like headdresses, beaded ornaments, long metal fingernails, and expressive dance movements that require extensive training (UNESCO, 2021).

Nora performances **(Figure 68)** commonly draw on local stories and communicate values related to morality, gratitude, respect for teachers, and connections with ancestors. The tradition is transmitted through families, community associations, cultural practitioners, and educational institutions. Its inscription recognizes Nora as an important expression of Southern Thai identity while supporting efforts to safeguard its performance knowledge, music, rituals, costumes, and craftsmanship for future generations (UNESCO, 2021).



Figure 68. Nora
Source: thairath.co.th and teesudshow.com

Beyond its cultural significance, Nora contributes to cultural tourism by allowing visitors to encounter the distinctive artistic traditions and cultural identity of Southern Thailand. Performances at cultural events, temples, community celebrations, and tourism activities can strengthen regional visibility and visitor appreciation, provided that cultural practitioners remain involved in how the tradition is interpreted and presented (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2021).

5.2.2.4 Songkran (2023)

Songkran in Thailand, Traditional Thai New Year Festival **(Figure 69)** was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2023. Celebrated in mid-April, Songkran marks the traditional Thai New Year and includes family reunions, merit-making, respect for older family members and ancestors, community activities, and the symbolic use of water for cleansing, renewal, and good fortune. UNESCO's inscription recognizes Songkran not only as a festive event but also as a social practice that promotes gratitude, cooperation, family bonds, and community participation (UNESCO, 2023).



Figure 69. Songkran in Thailand
Source: blog.bangkokair.com and thaichaplain.com

Songkran is also one of Thailand's most internationally recognizable cultural festivals and an important tourism and soft-power asset. Its nationwide celebrations allow domestic and international visitors to experience regional customs, religious practices, food, performances, and Thai hospitality. UNESCO recognition has further increased the festival's global visibility and encouraged its promotion as a major international cultural event (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023).

However, its growing tourism popularity also requires careful safeguarding. Large-scale events should preserve the festival's cultural meanings rather than presenting Songkran solely as recreational water entertainment. Community participation, accurate cultural interpretation, responsible water use, visitor safety, and respect for religious and family traditions are therefore essential to maintaining its authenticity and long-term cultural value.

5.2.2.5 Kebaya and Tomyum Kung (2024)

In 2024, UNESCO inscribed *Kebaya: Knowledge, Skills, Traditions and Practices* on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The inscription resulted from a multinational nomination involving Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Kebaya is a front-opening garment commonly decorated with embroidery and worn with a sarong. Its production requires knowledge of

fabric selection, pattern design, cutting, sewing, embroidery, and accessories, with these skills traditionally transmitted across generations (UNESCO, 2024).

Despite variations in design and use, kebaya **(Figure 70)** represents a shared cultural tradition that transcends national, ethnic, and religious boundaries in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, it is particularly associated with Baba–Nyonya or Peranakan communities in Phuket and other parts of Southern Thailand. Its inscription highlights both Thailand's multicultural heritage and the value of regional cooperation in safeguarding shared cultural traditions.



Figure 70. Kebaya Costume
Source: navanurak.in.th

In the same year, *Tomyum Kung* **(Figure 71)** was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List. Tomyum Kung is a traditional Thai prawn soup prepared with herbs such as lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, galangal, and shallots. The dish reflects the culinary wisdom of riverside communities in Thailand's Central Plains, including their knowledge of local ingredients, medicinal herbs, food preparation, and the natural environment (UNESCO, 2024).



Figure 71. Tomyum Kung
Source: hungryinthailand.com

The recognition of Tomyum Kung demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage encompasses not only a finished dish but also the knowledge, practices, environmental relationships, and social traditions associated with its preparation and consumption. Its inscription strengthens the international visibility of Thai gastronomy while supporting culinary tourism, cultural education, and Thailand's food-related soft power. However, safeguarding should emphasize the transmission of culinary knowledge and the continued use of locally rooted ingredients rather than focusing only on commercial promotion.

5.2.3 UNESCO Creative Cities in Thailand

Beyond World Heritage Sites and intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO promotes creativity as a driver of sustainable urban development through the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN). Established in 2004, the network encourages cities to place culture and creative industries at the centre of local development while strengthening international cooperation, social inclusion, resilience, and community well-being. The network currently covers eight creative fields: Architecture, Crafts and Folk Art, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Media Arts, and Music (UNESCO, 2026).

Thailand has actively participated in the UCCN and, as of July 2026, has nine designated UNESCO Creative Cities. Nan and Songkhla became the country's newest members in 2025, increasing the number from seven to nine **(Figure 72)** (Government Public Relations Department, 2025; UNESCO, 2025).

City	UNESCO creative field	Since
Songkhla	Gastronomy	2025
Nan	Crafts and Folk Art	2025
Suphanburi	Music	2023
Chiang Rai	Design	2023
Phetchaburi	Gastronomy	2021
Sukhothai	Crafts and Folk Art	2019
Bangkok	Design	2019
Chiang Mai	Crafts and Folk Art	2017
Phuket	Gastronomy	2015

Each city represents a distinctive form of creative cultural capital. Chiang Mai, Sukhothai, and Nan are recognized for Crafts and Folk Art, reflecting their traditions of textile weaving, ceramics, wood carving, silverwork, basketry, murals, and other artisan practices. Nan's creative identity, for example, is closely connected to textile production, embroidery, bamboo crafts, silverwork, wood carving, and pottery transmitted through families and community groups (UNESCO, 2026).



Figure 72. UNESCO Creative Cities in Thailand
Source: Thailand.prd.go.th

Phuket, Phetchaburi, and Songkhla are recognized for Gastronomy. Their culinary identities are shaped by local ecosystems, agricultural resources, historical trade, multicultural influences, and community knowledge. Songkhla's food culture, for example, draws upon the ecological resources of Songkhla Lake and Thai, Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Javanese culinary influences. Gastronomy therefore supports not only tourism but

also local food production, entrepreneurship, cultural continuity, and sustainable resource management (UNESCO, 2026).

Bangkok and Chiang Rai demonstrate the role of Design in connecting traditional knowledge with contemporary urban development. Bangkok's creative ecosystem includes artisans, designers, educational institutions, exhibitions, and creative districts, while Chiang Rai uses design to reinterpret local cultural identity and support creative development. Suphanburi's designation as a Creative City of Music recognizes its strong traditions of folk music, *luk thung*, performance communities, music education, and cultural events (UNESCO, 2026)

The Creative Cities Network demonstrates that cultural capital extends beyond the preservation of monuments and inherited traditions. Creativity enables cities to adapt cultural knowledge, artistic practices, gastronomy, and local identities to contemporary economic and social contexts. Creative City status can support destination branding, international visibility, creative entrepreneurship, cultural exchange, and the development of participatory tourism experiences.

Thailand's Creative Cities illustrate how cultural resources can be transformed into creative and tourism value. Craft workshops, design events, music festivals, culinary experiences, markets, and community activities allow visitors to engage directly with local culture. However, designation alone does not guarantee sustainable outcomes. Cities must continue supporting cultural practitioners, community participation, environmental responsibility, knowledge transmission, and

international collaboration to ensure that creative development benefits local societies.

5.2.4 UNESCO Heritage as Cultural Capital and Soft Power

UNESCO-recognized resources represent some of Thailand's most valuable forms of cultural capital. World Heritage Sites preserve places of outstanding historical, archaeological, and environmental significance; Intangible Cultural Heritage supports the transmission of living traditions and community knowledge; and UNESCO Creative Cities promote creativity, cultural industries, and innovation as drivers of sustainable urban development (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2026). Together, these forms of recognition strengthen cultural identity while increasing the international visibility of Thailand's heritage and creative resources.

UNESCO recognition can also enhance tourism value by strengthening destination image, encouraging cultural learning, and attracting visitors interested in heritage, gastronomy, festivals, crafts, and creative experiences. However, UNESCO emphasizes that tourism and heritage management should be integrated at the destination level so that cultural resources are protected, local communities benefit, and visitor development remains appropriate to the character and capacity of each destination (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

These international designations also contribute to nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and soft power. Heritage sites and living traditions communicate Thailand's history, values, creativity, and cultural diversity to international audiences, while

Creative Cities demonstrate the continuing relevance of Thai cultural knowledge in contemporary development. Heritage diplomacy research similarly suggests that internationally recognized heritage can shape national narratives, cross-border relationships, and perceptions of cultural attractiveness (Čeginskas & Lähdesmäki, 2023; Grincheva, 2024).

Nevertheless, UNESCO recognition should not be treated merely as a tourism label or promotional instrument. Increased visibility may create pressures related to overcrowding, commercialization, cultural simplification, and unequal benefit distribution. Its long-term value therefore depends on conservation, community participation, responsible interpretation, knowledge transmission, and sustainable visitor management. When these conditions are maintained, UNESCO-recognized heritage provides Thailand with a strong foundation for cultural tourism, cultural sustainability, and international soft power.

5.3 Temple Tourism

Temple tourism represents one of the most important forms of cultural tourism in Thailand and constitutes a significant component of the country's cultural capital. Theravada Buddhism has profoundly influenced Thai society, education, arts, architecture, rituals, and everyday life. Buddhist temples therefore function not only as places of worship but also as repositories of history, artistic knowledge, community identity, and collective memory. For domestic and international visitors, temples provide opportunities to experience Thailand's spiritual

traditions, architectural heritage, religious practices, and cultural values. Temple tourism consequently lies at the intersection of cultural, heritage, religious, and spiritual tourism.

In 2025, the National Office of Buddhism reported 44,504 temples throughout Thailand, comprising 323 royal temples and 44,181 ordinary temples (National Office of Buddhism, 2025). While most temples primarily serve their religious communities, many have also become tourism attractions because of their historical significance, sacred status, architecture, art, and cultural symbolism. Temples within Ayutthaya and Sukhothai, together with prominent contemporary sites such as Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai **(Figure 73)**, demonstrate the diversity of Thailand's temple-based attractions. Designed by Thai artist Mr. Chalermchai Kositpipat, Wat Rong Khun combines Buddhist symbolism with contemporary artistic expression through its white architecture, glass decoration, murals, and representations of heaven, suffering, and enlightenment (Tourism Authority of Thailand, Chiang Rai Office, 2022).



Figure 73. Wat Rong Khun, Chiang Rai
Source: travelxpress.co.th

The tourism value of temples depends on balancing visitor needs with their continuing sacred functions. Research on religious heritage sites indicates that religious and cultural dimensions are particularly important in shaping visitor experiences, whereas excessive emphasis on commercial activities may weaken the spiritual atmosphere. Appropriate interpretation, facilities, accessibility, and visitor management can improve satisfaction while preserving the religious character of sacred places (Pande & Shi, 2023). Temple tourism should therefore promote respectful behaviour, accurate cultural interpretation, community participation, and the protection of religious spaces and artistic heritage.

Temples represent a distinctive combination of tangible and intangible cultural capital. Tangible cultural capital is reflected in architecture, murals, sculptures, religious objects, historical monuments, and sacred landscapes that embody centuries of artistic development. Intangible cultural capital is expressed through Buddhist teachings, rituals, meditation, merit-making, festivals, oral traditions, and community values. Together, these material and living dimensions enable visitors to experience temples not merely as historic attractions but as culturally meaningful spaces that remain active within contemporary society.



Figure 74. Merit-Making Tradition
Source: dhammakaya.net

Figure 74 illustrates merit-making as a living religious practice through which individuals and communities express faith, generosity, gratitude, and social relationships. Its cultural significance lies not only in the visible ceremony but also in the knowledge, beliefs, and values transmitted through participation. This interpretation corresponds with UNESCO's concept of living heritage, which emphasizes that cultural practices are continuously recreated by communities and passed from one generation to another (UNESCO, 2003).

Temple tourism also contributes to cultural continuity and knowledge transmission. Temples have historically functioned as centres of education, social support, artistic

production, and community organization, and many continue to preserve religious knowledge, local histories, and traditional practices. Visitors may therefore engage with both physical heritage and cultural activities that remain meaningful to resident communities. UNESCO emphasizes that living heritage must remain community-based and relevant to its cultural bearers rather than being preserved as a static representation of the past.

Temple tourism has also expanded beyond sightseeing to include meditation retreats, Buddhist learning, mindfulness, and personal reflection. This development reflects growing interest in spiritual tourism experiences associated with self-discovery, mental renewal, personal growth, and well-being. Recent research identifies spiritual activities, intrinsic motivation, destination environments, visitor experience, and host-community support as important components of spiritual tourism development (Mishra & Maheshwari, 2025; Samarathunga et al., 2024). However, such experiences should maintain their religious and ethical foundations rather than presenting Buddhist practices merely as commercial wellness products.

Temple tourism can further contribute to Thailand's destination image and cultural soft power. Buddhist architecture, monastic traditions, merit-making, meditation, and religious festivals communicate aspects of Thai history, identity, and social values to international visitors. Research conducted at temples in Bangkok found that destination image influences visitor experience, which subsequently affects satisfaction and positive word of mouth (Poltanee & Boonphetkaew, 2023). This suggests that meaningful temple experiences can strengthen

wider perceptions of Thailand as a culturally rich and spiritually significant destination.

Despite these benefits, temple tourism presents important management challenges. Popular temples may experience overcrowding, inappropriate visitor behaviour, commercialization, physical deterioration, and tensions between worship and tourism. Social media can intensify these pressures by encouraging photography-focused visitation that overlooks religious meaning. Sustainable temple tourism therefore requires visitor education, dress and conduct guidelines, designated circulation areas, accessible interpretation, conservation planning, and consultation with monks and local communities. Effective management should ensure that temples remain functioning sacred places while providing respectful and educational experiences for visitors.

5.3.1 Buddhism and the Formation of Thai Cultural Identity

Understanding temple tourism in Thailand requires recognition of Buddhism's historical role in shaping Thai society and cultural identity. Theravada Buddhism has been closely associated with political authority, education, artistic production, community life, and social values since the development of the early Thai kingdoms. Although Thailand is religiously diverse, Buddhism remains the country's predominant religion. The latest nationwide survey of religion conducted by the National Statistical Office reported that 93.5% of the population identified as Buddhist in 2018 (National Statistical Office, 2018). This

figure should not be presented as a 2023 statistic because more recent official yearbooks continue to reference the 2018 national survey.

Buddhism played an important role in the development of Thai kingdoms and political institutions. From Sukhothai through Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin, rulers supported Buddhist monasteries, religious education, artistic production, and the monastic community. Kings were commonly represented as patrons and protectors of Buddhism, reinforcing the relationship among religion, political legitimacy, and social order. Buddhist architecture, sculpture, literature, rituals, and moral concepts consequently became deeply embedded in Thailand's historical development and national culture (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022). The Buddhist monuments of Sukhothai, for example, demonstrate the close relationship among royal patronage, religious belief, and the development of distinctive Thai artistic traditions.

Beyond their religious functions, temples traditionally served as multifunctional community institutions. They operated as centres of education, manuscript preservation, artistic production, social welfare, religious instruction, and community gathering. Before the expansion of state education, temples and monks played important roles in teaching literacy, Buddhist principles, local history, and moral conduct. Many temples continue to preserve religious texts, murals, architecture, ritual knowledge, and community histories while supporting educational and social activities. Buddhism therefore remains

connected not only to religious practice but also to the transmission of cultural knowledge and collective memory.

The influence of Buddhism also extends into social values and everyday practices. Concepts such as merit-making (*tham bun*), compassion (*metta*), gratitude (*katanyu*), mindfulness, moderation, and respect for others continue to shape family relationships, community rituals, and social expectations. These values have contributed to cultural narratives surrounding Thai hospitality, social harmony, generosity, and community responsibility. Recent scholarship similarly emphasizes that Buddhist ethical teachings, monastic institutions, and communal rituals remain influential in the construction of Thai cultural identity and social cohesion (Srichan et al., 2024).

This cultural legacy remains highly relevant to tourism. Visitors commonly perceive temples not only as religious buildings but also as cultural spaces through which they can learn about Thai history, philosophy, architecture, visual arts, rituals, and social values. Temple visits may include observing religious ceremonies, making merit, listening to Buddhist teachings, viewing murals and sacred objects, or interacting with monks and local communities. Such experiences can promote cultural learning and intercultural understanding when they are supported by accurate interpretation and respect for the temple's continuing sacred function.

The growth of spiritual and mindfulness tourism has further expanded the tourism relevance of Buddhism. Meditation retreats, temple stays, Buddhist learning programmes, and mindfulness activities attract visitors seeking reflection, well-

being, self-development, and meaningful cultural engagement. Contemporary research identifies spiritual motivation, authenticity, destination environment, personal transformation, and interaction with religious traditions as important dimensions of spiritual tourism (Mishra & Maheshwari, 2025; Samarathunga et al., 2024). However, Buddhist practices should not be separated from their ethical and cultural foundations or reduced to commercial wellness products. Temple tourism should therefore balance visitor participation with religious integrity, community involvement, and respect for living Buddhist traditions.

5.3.2 Temple Tourism as Cultural Heritage Tourism

Temple tourism is frequently classified as a form of heritage tourism because many Thai temples possess significant historical, architectural, artistic, and cultural value. Throughout Thailand, temples preserve styles and construction techniques associated with different historical periods, including the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Lanna, and Rattanakosin eras. UNESCO recognizes that the monuments of Sukhothai, for example, illustrate the beginnings of Thai architecture and the integration of local traditions with wider cultural influences into a distinctive Sukhothai style (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Temple architecture communicates the cultural evolution of Thai civilization through structures such as *chedis* or stupas, *ubosots* or ordination halls, *viharns* or assembly halls, murals, sculptures, and decorative craftsmanship. These architectural and artistic features allow temples to function as living museums that preserve religious knowledge, historical narratives, and traditional skills while continuing to serve contemporary communities.



Figure 75. Sri Rattana Chedi
Source: seaarts.sac.or.th

Figure 75 illustrates the *chedi* as both an architectural landmark and a sacred structure. Commonly associated with the enshrinement of Buddhist relics or sacred objects, chedis also reflect the artistic styles, religious beliefs, and construction knowledge of particular historical periods. Their forms and decorative elements therefore provide visitors with insights into the relationship between Buddhist belief and Thai architectural development.

The *ubosot* is the principal consecrated space in which important monastic ceremonies, particularly ordination, are performed. Its architecture, boundary stones, Buddha images, murals, and decorative features express both religious meaning and artistic craftsmanship. **Figure 76** demonstrates how ordination halls combine sacred functions with architectural heritage, making them important resources for religious interpretation and cultural tourism.



Figure 76. *Ubosots* (ordination halls)
Source: seaarts.sac.or.th and ancientbangkok.com



Figure 77. Mural Painting at Wat Matchimawat, Songkhla
Source: michaelbackmanltd.com

Temple murals provide another important form of cultural heritage. They commonly depict the life of the Buddha, Jataka stories, Buddhist cosmology, moral teachings, and scenes of everyday life. The murals at Wat Matchimawat in Songkhla **(Figure 77)** are particularly significant because they combine Buddhist narratives with local cultural details, including clothing, customs, architecture, and multicultural influences from Southern Thailand (Lyons, 2015). The Fine Arts Department notes that Thai temple murals were traditionally intended not only to create visual beauty but also to instruct and inspire viewers through religious and moral narratives.

The authenticity of temple architecture and artworks contributes strongly to visitor experience. Research indicates that perceived authenticity, cultural involvement, and experience quality can enhance satisfaction, destination image, recommendations, and revisit intentions at heritage destinations (Uslu et al., 2024). Temple tourism therefore allows visitors to engage directly with cultural environments that have preserved religious, artistic, and community functions across generations.

Effective interpretation is essential because architectural and artistic features may not be easily understood without cultural context. Guided tours, multilingual information, digital interpretation, and community-based storytelling can help visitors appreciate the meanings of chedis, ordination halls, murals, sculptures, and ritual spaces. However, interpretation and visitor facilities should be carefully managed to avoid disrupting worship, damaging historic structures, or weakening the sacred character of temples (Pande & Shi, 2023).

5.3.3 Temple Tourism and Soft Power

Temple tourism contributes to Thailand's soft power by communicating Buddhist heritage, artistic traditions, spirituality, and cultural values to international audiences. Images of temples such as Wat Arun frequently appear in tourism campaigns, films, travel media, and digital content, reinforcing associations between Thailand and cultural richness, historical depth, and spiritual experience. Wat Arun, for example, is regarded as an internationally recognizable landmark and has long been used as a symbol of Thai tourism (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT], 2024).

From a soft power perspective, temples communicate values associated with compassion, mindfulness, respect, generosity, harmony, and community. Visitors experience these values through architecture, religious ceremonies, merit-making, meditation, interactions with monks, and everyday temple life. Such encounters can create familiarity and positive emotional connections with Thai culture, allowing temple tourism to function as a form of cultural diplomacy and attraction rather than merely sightseeing (Nye, 2004).

Growing international interest in mindfulness, meditation, spiritual well-being, and personal transformation has further expanded the soft power potential of Buddhist heritage. Thailand's current tourism strategy specifically identifies meditation retreats and spiritual and belief-based tourism as priority products within its experience-led tourism development (TAT, 2025). Recent research also indicates that Buddhist tourism can create cultural and spiritual value when religious

teachings, emotional experience, creative interpretation, and respectful service design are integrated into tourism activities (Chotpittayanon et al., 2025).

However, the soft power value of temples depends on maintaining religious authenticity and cultural credibility. Buddhist practices should not be reduced to decorative attractions or commercial wellness products. Effective temple tourism should preserve sacred functions, involve monks and local communities, provide accurate interpretation, and encourage respectful visitor behaviour. When these conditions are maintained, temple tourism can strengthen Thailand's destination image while promoting cultural understanding, spiritual engagement, and long-term international attraction.

5.3.4 Economic Contributions of Temple Tourism

Temple tourism generates economic benefits through visitor expenditure on transportation, accommodation, food, guiding services, souvenirs, cultural activities, and donations. Prominent temples often function as anchor attractions that encourage visitors to explore surrounding historic districts, markets, restaurants, and cultural sites. Religious tourism can therefore stimulate local economic activity while creating opportunities for small businesses and community enterprises (Singh & Bhuyan, 2024).

Temple tourism also supports employment for guides, drivers, accommodation providers, food vendors, artisans, photographers, and cultural interpreters. However, the extent of

these benefits depends on how strongly tourism activities are connected to the local economy. Community participation, local ownership, and equitable benefit-sharing are important for ensuring that tourism income contributes to residents' quality of life rather than being concentrated among external operators (Obradović Strålman & Milentijević, 2026).

Wat Chedi, commonly known as Wat Ai Khai **(Figure 78)**, in Sichon District, Nakhon Si Thammarat, provides a notable Thai example. The temple has developed into a prominent faith-based tourism attraction centred on beliefs surrounding Ai Khai and rituals of worship, requesting blessings, and fulfilling vows. Visitor demand supports the sale of offerings, firecrackers, military-style clothing, rooster statues, food, and other locally provided goods and services. It has also stimulated employment, construction, transportation, and tourism-related economic activity within the surrounding community (Achito et al., 2020; Ruengmak & Dejpawuttikul, 2024).



Figure 78. *Wat Chedi* (Ai Khai)
Source: thai.tourismthailand.org

The scale of this economic contribution is substantial. Using the Zonal Travel Cost Method, Sean-oon and Seenprachawong (2022) estimated the annual economic value of visits to the Ai Khai statue at Wat Chedi at approximately THB 293.03 million. The case demonstrates how religious belief and local cultural narratives can transform a temple into an anchor attraction that generates economic value extending beyond the temple grounds to local vendors, transport providers, cultural-product producers, and surrounding communities.

Tourism revenue and visitor donations may also support temple maintenance, restoration, interpretation, security, and the preservation of religious artworks. Nevertheless, economic development should not compromise sacred functions or heritage integrity. When managed responsibly, temple tourism can create a mutually reinforcing relationship among local livelihoods, visitor experience, religious continuity, and heritage conservation.

5.4 Meditation Tourism and Mindfulness Travel

One of Thailand's most distinctive forms of spiritual tourism is meditation tourism. Buddhist monasteries, meditation centres, temples, and private retreat facilities across the country provide programmes ranging from introductory mindfulness sessions to intensive residential retreats. Thailand's Buddhist heritage, established tourism infrastructure, and international reputation for wellness have contributed to its appeal among visitors seeking contemplative and spiritually meaningful travel experiences.

The growing international interest in mindfulness and holistic well-being has increased demand for travel centred on meditation, reflection, and personal development. Unlike conventional tourism, meditation tourism emphasizes inward attention rather than external sightseeing. Visitors may travel to Thailand to learn meditation techniques, explore Buddhist teachings, experience monastic environments, or temporarily withdraw from demanding routines. Research in Chiang Mai found that international visitors participated in mindfulness practices for spiritual exploration and self-development, even when they did not identify with a particular religion (Choe & O'Regan, 2020).

Meditation tourism also intersects with wellness and transformative tourism. Participants are commonly motivated by stress reduction, emotional balance, self-awareness, spiritual development, and a desire for personal change. Contemporary wellness-tourism research increasingly treats mental, physical, spiritual, and environmental well-being as interconnected dimensions of the visitor experience (Karagianni et al., 2025). Culturally grounded contemplative retreats may therefore create outcomes such as inner calm, cultural immersion, emotional renewal, and enhanced self-understanding rather than merely short-term relaxation.



Figure 79. Meditation Tourism in Thailand
Source: phuket-meditation.com and travelandleisureasia.com

Figure 79 illustrates how meditation experiences can be integrated into established tourism destinations such as Phuket. Such programmes diversify the island's image beyond coastal recreation by connecting spiritual practice with wellness, nature, and personal renewal. This positioning is relevant because Thailand's wellness-tourism market reached approximately USD 14 billion in 2024, while the country has become internationally recognized for wellness retreats, Buddhist spiritual practices, traditional therapies, and holistic tourism experiences (Global Wellness Institute, 2026).

Thailand consequently has considerable potential to strengthen its position as a destination for mindfulness and life-enhancing travel. However, meditation tourism should preserve the cultural and ethical foundations of Buddhist practice rather than presenting meditation solely as a commercial wellness product. Effective development requires qualified instructors, respectful visitor behaviour, appropriate interpretation, and cooperation with temples and local communities.

5.4.1 Forest Monasteries and Sacred Landscapes

Thailand's forest-monastery tradition represents an important component of spiritual tourism. Influenced by the Thai Forest Tradition, these monasteries emphasize meditation, simplicity, renunciation, mindfulness, self-discipline, and communal life. Many are situated in forests, mountains, caves, and remote rural landscapes, where quietness and seclusion create conditions conducive to contemplation and spiritual practice.

Wat Pah Nanachat, or the International Forest Monastery, in Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani, provides a significant example. Established by Ajahn Chah in 1975, the monastery enables English-speaking monks and lay practitioners from different countries to experience the lifestyle and discipline of the Theravada Forest Tradition. Visitors with previous meditation experience may stay at the monastery and participate in chanting, sitting and walking meditation, communal work, Buddhist instruction, and daily monastic routines. They are also expected to observe the Eight Precepts and follow principles of simplicity, renunciation, cooperation, and respect (Wat Pah Nanachat, 2026.

Wat Pah Nanachat **(Figure 80)** is not promoted as a conventional meditation retreat or tourism attraction. Rather than offering private courses or packaged activities, it allows accepted visitors to participate in the everyday life of a functioning forest monastery. This distinction is important because it positions visitors as temporary members of a spiritual community rather than passive consumers of religious experiences. The monastery's emphasis on quietness, limited technology, simple living, and adherence to monastic routines helps preserve the authenticity and sacredness of the experience.

The natural environment is not merely a scenic setting but an integral part of forest-monastery practice. Forests provide spaces for developing mindfulness, reducing attachment, observing natural change, and reflecting on relationships between human life and the environment. Thai Buddhist monks have also applied religious principles to environmental

stewardship, sustainable agriculture, and forest conservation, illustrating the relationship among spirituality, community livelihoods, and ecological awareness (Darlington, 2019).



Figure 80. International Forest Monastery, Thailand
Source: region2.prd.go.th

Forest monasteries and sacred landscapes are particularly relevant to visitors seeking experiences that combine nature, simplicity, inner calm, and spiritual development. Research on wellness tourism in Thailand identifies physical, mental, spiritual, and environmental dimensions as interconnected elements of holistic tourism experiences (Kongtaveesawas et al., 2022). Forest-monastery experiences can engage these dimensions through meditation, disciplined living, natural surroundings, personal reflection, and temporary separation from everyday distractions.

Thailand's forest monasteries therefore possess potential as distinctive spiritual and wellness tourism resources. However, their religious functions must remain more important than tourism development. Visitor access should respect monastic discipline, silence, sacredness, environmental carrying capacity, and local religious practices. Promotion should provide accurate information, discourage casual sightseeing, and ensure that visitors understand their responsibilities as participants within a living spiritual environment.

5.4.2 Spiritual Tourism and Wellness

The relationship between spirituality and wellness has become increasingly important in contemporary tourism. Wellness tourism extends beyond physical health to include mental, emotional, social, environmental, and spiritual well-being. The Global Wellness Institute defines it as travel associated with maintaining or enhancing personal well-being,

including activities that promote stress reduction, healthy lifestyles, mind–body balance, and meaningful connections with people, culture, and nature (Global Wellness Institute, 2026).

Thailand is well positioned to respond to this demand because its tourism resources combine traditional healing knowledge, Buddhist spirituality, nature, and established hospitality services. Nuad Thai, herbal treatments, meditation, mindfulness, and traditional approaches to holistic health provide culturally distinctive foundations for wellness tourism. Yoga, forest bathing, healthy cuisine, spa therapies, and preventive healthcare are also increasingly integrated into retreats and wellness programmes that emphasize relaxation, personal growth, and holistic well-being (Global Wellness Institute, 2026).

The integration of spiritual and wellness activities enables Thailand to offer experiences that extend beyond conventional spa services. Meditation retreats, temple stays, nature-based healing, traditional. Meditation retreats, temple therapies, and mindful living programmes can support reflection, emotional restoration, and deeper cultural engagement. However, spiritual traditions should be presented respectfully and should not be reduced to commercial treatments detached from their religious and cultural meanings.

Thailand's wellness-tourism market reached approximately USD 14 billion in 2024, following growth of 36.4% from the previous year. The country ranked 15th globally in wellness-tourism expenditure, demonstrating the economic significance of this sector and Thailand's strong competitive

position (Globa2026). Future development should therefore combine service quality and innovation with cultural authenticity, environmental responsibility, qualified practitioners, and benefits for local communities.

5.4.3 Religious and Spiritual Tourism as Soft Power

Religious and spiritual tourism contributes significantly to Thailand's soft power because spiritual experiences often create emotional, cultural, and personal connections that extend beyond conventional sightseeing. Visitors who participate in meditation, religious festivals, sacred rituals, or spiritual learning may develop deeper appreciation of local values and ways of life. Research suggests that the value of spiritual tourism is shaped by religious motivation, cultural context, authenticity, personal beliefs, and the atmosphere of sacred places (Samarathunga et al., 2024; Sarakong et al., 2024).

A prominent example is the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok's Ratchaprasong district **(Figure 81)**. Although it is commonly called the "Four-Faced Buddha" by some international visitors, the shrine is actually dedicated to *Phra Phrom*, the Thai representation of Brahma, the Hindu deity associated with creation. The statue's four faces look toward the four cardinal directions, symbolizing its ability to observe and provide blessings in every direction. Worshippers commonly pray for success, prosperity, health, family well-being, and good fortune (TAT, 2025).

Visitors offer incense, candles, fruit, and flower garlands, while those who believe their wishes have been fulfilled may commission traditional Thai dancers to perform as an expression of gratitude. Located amid luxury hotels, shopping centres, elevated railways, and heavy urban traffic, the shrine demonstrates how Hindu-derived beliefs, Thai ritual practices, traditional performing arts, tourism, and modern city life coexist within Bangkok. It is therefore not merely a tourist landmark but a living sacred space that attracts Thai worshippers and international visitors from culturally diverse backgrounds.



Figure 81. The Erawan Shrine
Source: expedia.co.th and thailand.go.th

The shrine also illustrates the growing importance of faith-based or *Mutelu* tourism in Thailand. Such tourism includes visits to temples, shrines, sacred objects, and ritual sites associated with blessings, protection, fortune, relationships, and personal reassurance. Government and tourism initiatives increasingly recognize these beliefs as cultural resources that can attract visitors, support local economic activity, and communicate Thailand's distinctive mixture of Buddhist, Brahmanical, Hindu, and local spiritual traditions (Government Public Relations Department, 2023; Chotpittayanon et al., 2025).

Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness, merit-making, and other spiritual traditions similarly communicate values related to compassion, balance, self-awareness, generosity, harmony, and respect. Through direct participation, visitors may develop positive perceptions of Thai society and communicate these experiences to others, allowing religious and spiritual tourism to function as a form of cultural diplomacy and soft power (Nye, 2004).

However, the soft power value of spiritual tourism depends on authenticity and cultural credibility. Excessive commercialization may reduce sacred practices to entertainment or marketable superstition, weakening their cultural meanings. Spiritual sites should therefore provide accurate interpretation, respect diverse beliefs, involve religious communities, manage visitor behaviour, and ensure that tourism promotion does not undermine sacredness. When managed responsibly, religious and spiritual tourism can strengthen Thailand's international image

while supporting intercultural understanding, living traditions, and meaningful visitor experiences.

5.5 Heritage Preservation and Visitor Management

The long-term success of heritage tourism depends not only on the attractiveness of cultural resources but also on their effective preservation and management. Heritage resources are fragile, place-specific, and frequently irreplaceable. Unlike conventional tourism products, historic structures, archaeological remains, sacred places, cultural landscapes, and living traditions cannot easily be restored once their physical integrity or cultural meaning has been seriously damaged. Heritage preservation and visitor management are therefore central to sustainable tourism development.

This issue is particularly important for Thailand, where cultural tourism relies extensively on historic cities, archaeological sites, temples, museums, festivals, cultural landscapes, and community traditions. These resources contribute to tourism competitiveness, cultural identity, education, and soft power. However, increasing visitor numbers, urban development, inappropriate infrastructure, environmental change, commercialization, and climate-related hazards can place substantial pressure on heritage destinations. UNESCO's climate-action policy consequently calls for heritage management to incorporate risk assessment, adaptation, disaster preparedness, and continuous monitoring (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023).

Visitor management seeks to balance public access with the protection of heritage values. Relevant measures may include assessing carrying capacity, regulating access to sensitive areas, establishing visitor routes and time slots, dispersing tourists across locations and seasons, providing codes of conduct, and using interpretation to encourage responsible behaviour. UNESCO emphasizes that sustainable tourism at heritage sites requires coordinated planning, stakeholder participation, and management strategies adapted to the character and capacity of each destination (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026)

Preservation should extend beyond the physical repair of monuments. It should also maintain historical authenticity, sacred functions, cultural meanings, traditional knowledge, and relationships between heritage places and local communities. Tourism revenue may support conservation, interpretation, security, and maintenance, but economic use should not take priority over cultural integrity. Community participation is particularly important because residents and cultural practitioners possess knowledge about how heritage should be interpreted, safeguarded, and transmitted.

Effective management therefore requires collaboration among heritage authorities, tourism organizations, local governments, religious institutions, businesses, communities, and visitors. When conservation planning, visitor experience, climate resilience, and community benefits are managed together, heritage tourism can generate economic and educational value without undermining the resources on which it depends. Heritage preservation and visitor management should

consequently be viewed not as restrictions on tourism growth but as essential investments in the long-term sustainability of cultural capital.

5.5.1 Heritage Preservation in the Tourism Context

Heritage preservation **(Figure 82)** refers to the identification, protection, conservation, restoration, interpretation, and sustainable use of cultural resources. Contemporary preservation extends beyond the physical repair of monuments and archaeological remains to include cultural meanings, living traditions, community knowledge, and relationships between people and heritage places. UNESCO increasingly emphasizes participatory approaches that integrate local communities, living heritage, and sustainable tourism into heritage decision-making (UNESCO, 2025).



Figure 82. Thai Heritage Preservation
Source: finearts.go.th

Historically, conservation focused primarily on protecting monuments, buildings, and objects from physical deterioration. Contemporary approaches recognize heritage as a living resource whose significance is continuously interpreted and maintained by communities. Preservation must therefore consider social, cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions alongside material authenticity. Tourism may support this process through conservation funding, education, and public awareness, but it may also create congestion, commercialization, and physical pressure when visitor use is not appropriately managed.

In Thailand, the Fine Arts Department under the Ministry of Culture is the principal government agency responsible for safeguarding the nation's artistic and cultural heritage. Its

responsibilities include implementing legislation concerning ancient monuments, antiquities, objects of art, and national museums; conducting archaeological and conservation work; managing historical parks, archaeological sites, cultural World Heritage properties, and national museums; and developing and disseminating cultural knowledge (Fine Arts Department, 2026).

The Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning (ONEP) also plays an important role, particularly in relation to natural and cultural environments, old towns, and World Heritage properties. Its duties include evaluating the environmental quality and significance of natural and artistic sites, supporting their registration and protection, providing technical guidance, developing heritage databases, and coordinating matters related to the World Heritage Convention (Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, 2026).

Provincial authorities, local governments, temples, educational institutions, private organizations, cultural practitioners, and communities also contribute to heritage preservation. Their participation is particularly important because cultural significance cannot always be determined solely by government agencies or technical experts. Local communities possess knowledge of historical meanings, religious practices, traditional uses, and social relationships associated with heritage resources.

Within tourism destinations, successful preservation requires balancing physical conservation, cultural integrity, visitor access, community needs, and economic development.

UNESCO's sustainable-tourism approach encourages coordinated destination management that protects heritage values while creating appropriate visitor experiences and benefits for local communities (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026). Heritage preservation should therefore be understood not as preventing tourism development but as ensuring that tourism use remains compatible with the authenticity, significance, and long-term continuity of cultural resources.

5.5.2 Tourism as Both Opportunity and Threat

Tourism creates both opportunities and challenges for heritage preservation. On the positive side, entrance fees, donations, tourism taxes, and visitor expenditure can provide financial resources for conservation, restoration, interpretation, security, maintenance, and educational activities. Heritage attractions may also stimulate local economies by supporting guiding services, transportation, accommodation, food businesses, crafts, and community-based tourism. UNESCO emphasizes that sustainable tourism should generate benefits for heritage protection and local development while maintaining the cultural values that attract visitors (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).



Figure 83. Ticket Office at Si Thep Historical Park
Source: Butic via pantip.com

The ticket office at Si Thep Historical Park **(Figure 83)** illustrates an important element of visitor management. Ticketing systems can generate entrance revenue, record visitor numbers, regulate access, and provide information about visiting conditions and appropriate behaviour. Such data can assist managers in identifying peak periods, monitoring changes in visitation, and planning staff, facilities, interpretation, and conservation measures. However, ticketing alone does not guarantee sustainable management; revenue allocation, visitor monitoring, community participation, and transparent conservation planning are also required.

This issue is particularly relevant to Si Thep following its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2023. The World Heritage Committee recommended that Thailand complete a comprehensive management plan incorporating sustainable tourism, risk management, community engagement, heritage impact assessment, and improved monitoring. These recommendations reflect the need to ensure that increased recognition and visitor demand do not undermine the archaeological integrity and cultural significance of the site (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2023).

Tourism may also place substantial pressure on heritage resources. High visitor concentrations can contribute to physical wear, congestion, waste, inappropriate behaviour, environmental degradation, and pressure for new infrastructure. Rather than relying solely on a fixed carrying-capacity number, contemporary visitor management increasingly uses site-specific data to establish acceptable levels of change and determine how visitor flows affect heritage values, local communities, and experience quality (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Appropriate measures may include timed entry, designated visitor routes, restrictions on access to sensitive areas, seasonal and geographical dispersal, codes of conduct, multilingual interpretation, and continuous monitoring. UNESCO's Visitor Management Assessment and Strategy Tool further encourages heritage managers to assess tourism conditions systematically and develop strategies that protect heritage values while contributing to resilient communities and

sustainable local development (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Tourism should therefore be regarded neither as an automatic source of conservation funding nor solely as a threat. Its effects depend on how revenue, visitor access, infrastructure, community benefits, and heritage impacts are managed. When tourism income is reinvested responsibly and visitation remains compatible with conservation objectives, tourism can strengthen heritage preservation. When growth is poorly planned, however, it may accelerate the deterioration of the cultural resources on which the destination depends.

5.5.3 Overtourism and Heritage Destinations

Overtourism has emerged as a major challenge in heritage tourism. It occurs when the scale or concentration of visitation exceeds the physical, environmental, social, or managerial capacity of a destination, creating negative effects on heritage resources, local communities, visitor experiences, or everyday life. At archaeological and historic sites, even short periods of intense visitation may become problematic when fragile structures, narrow circulation areas, and limited facilities cannot accommodate visitor demand.



Figure 84. Prasat Ta Kwai, Surin Province
Source: thaipost.net

In heritage destinations, excessive foot traffic may accelerate surface wear and physical deterioration, while congestion can reduce visitor satisfaction and weaken the quality of cultural interpretation. Large visitor concentrations may also generate noise, litter, traffic pressure, and demand for facilities that are incompatible with the historical setting. In surrounding communities, tourism growth may contribute to rising prices, commercialization, changes in land use, and the simplification of local culture for visitor consumption.

International destinations such as Venice, Machu Picchu, and Angkor demonstrate that unmanaged tourism growth can

threaten the resources on which tourism depends. These cases have encouraged greater use of timed admission, visitor quotas, alternative routes, seasonal dispersal, and continuous monitoring. UNESCO emphasizes that sustainable tourism at heritage properties requires balanced stakeholder participation, protection of heritage values, and management strategies adapted to the conditions of each site (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Prasat Ta Kwai in Surin Province provides a useful Thai example of the vulnerability of a small archaeological site to concentrated visitation. Located in a forested area near the Thai–Cambodian border, the sanctuary is an ancient Khmer religious structure whose appeal derives from its architecture, historical significance, borderland setting, and surrounding natural landscape (TAT, 2026). **Figure 84** illustrates how the monument and its immediate surroundings form a relatively confined visitor space, meaning that sudden increases in visitation can create congestion along access routes and around the archaeological structure.

During special travel periods or heightened public interest, a relatively large number of visitors may arrive within a short period, increasing the need for crowd management, site protection, visitor guidance, waste control, and safety measures. The site also requires management considerations beyond conventional tourism pressure. Its borderland location means that heritage conservation, visitor access, public safety, and security conditions are closely interconnected. The Fine Arts Department has identified Prasat Ta Kwai as an archaeological monument requiring professional conservation and restoration,

while noting that work in the area must take account of site security and staff safety (Fine Arts Department, 2026). Tourism promotion should therefore remain responsive to official access conditions and conservation requirements.

Appropriate management measures may include clearly defined walking routes, barriers around fragile structures, limits on group size, temporary access restrictions, visitor-count monitoring, trained site personnel, interpretive signs, and advance communication concerning safety and appropriate behaviour. Noise, climbing on archaeological remains, touching stone surfaces, and littering should be actively discouraged. Such measures would allow visitors to appreciate the monument while reducing pressure on its material fabric and peaceful cultural landscape.

Thailand faces similar visitor-management challenges at major heritage destinations such as Ayutthaya, Bangkok's historic temples, and popular festival locations. While high visitation can generate employment and conservation revenue, it may also produce congestion, physical deterioration, inappropriate development, and poorer visitor experiences. Sustainable heritage tourism therefore requires management based not simply on attracting more visitors but on maintaining acceptable conditions for heritage resources, host communities, and visitors.

Accordingly, overtourism should be assessed according to site-specific conditions rather than visitor numbers alone. Management agencies should monitor visitor flows, physical impacts, community perceptions, infrastructure capacity, and

experience quality. Proactive planning is particularly important for smaller or fragile heritage sites such as Prasat Ta Kwai, where even temporary crowding may cause disproportionate pressure.

5.5.4 Visitor Management Strategies

Visitor management refers to the planning and implementation of measures that influence where visitors go, when they visit, and how they behave. Its purpose is not simply to restrict tourism but to balance public access, heritage protection, community well-being, and visitor experience. UNESCO emphasizes that effective visitor management requires reliable information about visitor numbers, seasonal patterns, congestion points, behaviour, and impacts on heritage resources and host communities (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

One commonly applied approach is carrying-capacity management. Carrying capacity is often described as the level of visitation that a destination can accommodate without producing unacceptable physical, environmental, social, cultural, or experiential impacts. However, it should not always be understood as a single fixed number. The capacity of a heritage site may vary according to season, time of day, visitor behaviour, available facilities, management resources, and the sensitivity of particular areas. UNESCO therefore recommends considering a carrying-capacity range and developing management measures that respond when acceptable thresholds are approached or exceeded (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Capacity-management techniques include timed-entry systems, advance reservations, visitor quotas, differential pricing, zoning, one-way routes, restrictions on access to fragile areas, and limits on group size. Visitor data obtained from ticketing systems, observation, surveys, and digital monitoring can help managers identify peak periods and adjust routes, staffing, facilities, and access arrangements. These measures are most effective when they are based on site-specific evidence and continuously reviewed rather than applied uniformly throughout the year.

Visitor communication is equally important. Codes of conduct, multilingual interpretation, signs, trained guides, websites, and booking information can explain why restrictions are necessary and encourage visitors to respect sacred, archaeological, and community spaces. UNESCO notes that communication should begin before visitors arrive because expectations and behaviour are often shaped during the trip-planning stage (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Another important strategy is visitor dispersal. Destinations can reduce pressure on major attractions by encouraging visitors to travel during less crowded periods, follow alternative routes, stay longer in surrounding areas, and visit secondary heritage sites. Dispersal can improve visitor experiences while distributing tourism expenditure to a wider range of communities. However, lesser-known destinations should not be promoted without first assessing their infrastructure, conservation needs, community readiness, and management capacity.

Visitor dispersal offers considerable potential for Thailand because cultural resources are distributed across all regions of the country. Thailand's emerging Equitable Tourism approach promotes secondary destinations, weekday travel, community-based tourism, and stronger local supply chains in order to distribute visitors and tourism income more evenly. The policy also emphasizes the use of technology and data for carrying-capacity management and evidence-based destination planning (OECD, 2026).

Effective visitor management therefore requires a combination of capacity assessment, visitor-flow regulation, communication, interpretation, monitoring, and regional dispersal. Its success should be evaluated not only through visitor numbers but also through heritage condition, resident perceptions, visitor satisfaction, local economic benefits, and the quality of cultural experiences. When these strategies are coordinated, tourism access can remain compatible with heritage conservation and sustainable destination development.

5.5.5 Interpretation and Heritage Education

Visitor management is not limited to controlling visitor numbers and movements; it also involves shaping understanding, expectations, and behaviour. Heritage interpretation helps visitors recognize the historical, cultural, religious, and social significance of heritage resources while explaining why particular rules and conservation measures are necessary. UNESCO emphasizes that effective communication should enable visitors to understand a site's distinctiveness and authenticity and encourage behaviour that respects both heritage resources and host communities (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Interpretation may take various forms, including guided tours, storytelling, exhibitions, visitor centres, information panels, maps, audio guides, educational programmes, and community-led activities. Guided tours are particularly valuable because trained guides can adapt information to visitors' backgrounds, explain cultural meanings, correct misunderstandings, and communicate appropriate conduct at sensitive or sacred sites.



Figure 85. Guided Tour Interpretation
Source: gettgo.com

Figure 85 illustrates the role of guides as intermediaries between heritage resources and visitors. Rather than merely providing factual information, guides can connect physical features with historical narratives, local memories, living traditions, and contemporary community life. UNESCO recommends training guides and local tourism professionals to communicate heritage significance, visitor-management concerns, and sustainability messages consistently throughout the visitor experience (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Digital tools, including mobile applications, augmented reality, virtual reconstructions, and multilingual multimedia, can complement personal interpretation by presenting damaged, inaccessible, or historically altered features in understandable

ways. Research indicates that augmented reality can enhance education, authenticity, visitor satisfaction, and intentions to revisit heritage museums when its content is credible, visually appropriate, and connected meaningfully to the physical site (Chen et al., 2024). However, digital technology should support rather than replace authentic engagement with heritage places, communities, and cultural practitioners.

Interpretation also contributes directly to heritage protection. Visitors who understand the significance and vulnerability of heritage resources are more likely to accept access restrictions, follow codes of conduct, avoid damaging behaviour, and support conservation. Interpretation can additionally influence visitor flows by presenting important narratives in less sensitive areas, thereby reducing prolonged crowding around fragile heritage features (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

In Thailand, high-quality interpretation can strengthen cultural diplomacy and soft power by providing international visitors with deeper understanding of Thai history, Buddhism, regional cultures, artistic traditions, and community values. Accurate, multilingual, and inclusive interpretation helps move tourism beyond superficial observation and allows heritage experiences to promote intercultural understanding. Heritage education therefore contributes simultaneously to visitor satisfaction, responsible behaviour, cultural continuity, conservation, and Thailand's international cultural image.

5.5.6 Community Participation and Heritage Stewardship

Contemporary heritage management increasingly recognizes local communities not merely as stakeholders but as custodians and co-managers of cultural heritage. Their knowledge, memories, traditions, values, and everyday practices often contribute directly to the significance of heritage places. UNESCO consequently places community empowerment and balanced stakeholder participation at the centre of sustainable heritage tourism management (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Community-based approaches recognize that long-term preservation requires local support, knowledge, and engagement. Conservation initiatives that exclude residents may create conflict, weaken cultural authenticity, and separate heritage resources from the communities that give them meaning. Conversely, community participation can strengthen local ownership, improve management decisions, and connect heritage preservation with livelihoods and community well-being. Research at the Melaka UNESCO World Heritage Site similarly indicates that cultural knowledge, awareness, education, and participation are closely associated with stronger community support for living-heritage conservation (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023).



Figure 86. Local Community Participation
Source: thailandvillageacademy.com

Figure 86 illustrates the role of local residents in presenting community knowledge and cultural practices through tourism. Meaningful participation should extend beyond performing for visitors or attending consultation meetings. Communities should be involved in identifying cultural significance, planning tourism activities, interpreting local histories, managing visitor behaviour, monitoring impacts, and determining how tourism income is distributed. UNESCO's sustainable-tourism guidance also encourages destinations to engage local communities and businesses in developing tourism strategies that reflect local identities and needs (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026).

Community participation is particularly important for intangible heritage, including festivals, performing arts, craftsmanship, rituals, oral traditions, and local knowledge. These forms of heritage exist primarily through the people who practise, maintain, and transmit them. The 2003 Convention therefore requires the widest possible participation of the communities, groups, and individuals concerned and their active involvement in safeguarding and management (UNESCO, 2003). UNESCO further emphasizes that cultural activities should be based on transparent collaboration and the free, prior, sustained, and informed consent of cultural bearers (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2026).

Effective heritage stewardship therefore requires partnerships among communities, government agencies, heritage professionals, tourism businesses, educational institutions, and visitors. Such partnerships should provide communities with

decision-making authority, training, financial support, market access, and opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transmission. When participation is meaningful rather than symbolic, tourism can strengthen community identity, cultural continuity, conservation outcomes, and equitable local development.

5.5.7 Climate Change and Heritage Preservation

Climate change has emerged as a major challenge for heritage preservation worldwide. Rising temperatures, flooding, drought, coastal erosion, storms, wildfire, and changing humidity can accelerate the deterioration of historic structures, archaeological remains, cultural landscapes, and traditional settlements. A UNESCO and World Resources Institute assessment found that 73% of World Heritage properties are highly exposed to at least one water-related hazard, illustrating the growing importance of climate resilience in heritage management (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025).

UNESCO's *Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage* emphasizes that climate-related risks should be incorporated into conservation, disaster preparedness, adaptation, monitoring, and site-management planning. Effective responses should combine scientific evidence, local and traditional knowledge, stakeholder participation, and measures appropriate to the cultural significance and physical characteristics of each heritage property (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023).



Figure 87. Flooding in Ayutthaya World Heritage Site
Source: mgronline.com

Figure 87 illustrates the vulnerability of the Historic City of Ayutthaya to flooding. The severe floods of 2011 submerged parts of the World Heritage property for more than one month and affected historic monuments and surrounding communities. In response, UNESCO worked with Thai agencies and international hydrological experts to examine flood-risk reduction measures. Recommendations included restoring Ayutthaya's historic network of canals and ponds to provide temporary water storage and protecting green areas that historically functioned as floodplains (Unakul, 2025).

The Ayutthaya case demonstrates that heritage preservation should extend beyond repairing damaged monuments after disasters. Climate adaptation should be

integrated into urban planning, drainage and water management, land-use regulation, emergency response, visitor safety, and the protection of surrounding cultural landscapes. Heritage-based solutions may be particularly valuable because traditional settlement patterns and water-management systems often reflect long-term adaptation to local environmental conditions.

Thailand's coastal heritage, historic towns, temples, archaeological sites, and cultural landscapes face different combinations of flooding, erosion, heat, storms, and environmental change. Site managers should therefore undertake climate-risk assessments, document baseline heritage conditions, establish early-warning and emergency procedures, and monitor changes in materials and landscapes. Collaboration among heritage authorities, environmental agencies, local governments, researchers, communities, and tourism organizations is essential for ensuring that adaptation measures protect both cultural significance and community well-being.

Climate resilience should consequently be treated as an integral component of sustainable heritage tourism. Without effective adaptation, climate-related damage may weaken cultural authenticity, interrupt tourism activities, increase conservation costs, and threaten local livelihoods. Proactive planning can help safeguard Thailand's cultural capital while ensuring that heritage destinations remain accessible, meaningful, and resilient for future generations.

5.5.8 Digital Technologies and Smart Heritage Management

Digital technologies are increasingly becoming integral to the entire heritage-management cycle, encompassing documentation, condition assessment, preventive conservation, risk management, interpretation, and visitor management. Geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, photogrammetry, light detection and ranging (LiDAR), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), Heritage Building Information Modelling (HBIM), artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and data analytics allow heritage managers to integrate spatial, architectural, historical, environmental, and structural information within interconnected digital environments. These technologies facilitate non-destructive documentation, risk mapping, deterioration assessment, scenario modelling, and more evidence-based conservation decisions (Penjor et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025).

HBIM represents an important development beyond conventional three-dimensional visualisation. An HBIM model can function as an information-rich database that connects the geometry of a historic structure with records concerning materials, construction techniques, historical transformations, structural conditions, previous interventions, and conservation requirements. When HBIM is connected with sensors and continuously updated environmental or structural data, it may evolve into a heritage digital twin. Such systems create a dynamic relationship between a physical heritage asset and its digital representation, supporting continuous monitoring, predictive analysis, preventive maintenance, and the simulation

of alternative conservation interventions before they are implemented on the actual structure (Hou et al., 2024; Vuoto et al., 2023).



Figure 88. 3D GIS in the Phra That Phanom Area
Source: supermap.com

Immersive technologies, including virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR), also contribute to heritage interpretation and public education. Virtual environments can reconstruct damaged, inaccessible, or no-longer-existing elements of historic sites, while AR can overlay historical images, architectural reconstructions, oral histories, and interpretive information onto visitors' views of physical environments. Recent research indicates that immersive applications can promote engagement, experiential learning, and wider access to cultural heritage, although their effectiveness depends considerably on content quality, usability, technological accessibility, and interpretive design (Zhang et al., 2024). Virtual tourism can also provide educational and cultural value by

enabling prospective or remote visitors to explore heritage resources beyond geographical and physical limitations (Yin et al., 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of museums, monuments, archives, and heritage destinations. Temporary closures encouraged cultural institutions to develop virtual exhibitions, online collections, livestreamed tours, digital archives, and interactive educational programmes. These developments demonstrated that virtual access could complement physical visitation by extending access to people who face geographical, financial, mobility, or health-related barriers. Digital access can also support pre-visit learning and provide alternative ways of experiencing highly fragile or restricted heritage environments, potentially reducing the need for repeated physical access to sensitive areas. Nevertheless, virtual heritage should generally be understood as a complementary mode of access rather than a complete substitute for direct engagement with heritage places and communities (Abd Hamid, 2023; UNESCO, 2026; Yin et al., 2024).

Figure 88 illustrates the application of 3D GIS and BIM technologies to heritage conservation and urban planning around Phra That Phanom in Nakhon Phanom Province. The project combined aerial photographs captured by a fixed-wing UAV, ground-control points, field surveys, observations, and attribute information from approximately 5,000 buildings. The aerial survey covered approximately 5.50 square kilometres, or 550 hectares, surrounding the monument. The resulting digital database included information concerning buildings, land use,

ownership, roads, waterways, streets, photographs, and other physical characteristics of the surrounding urban environment (Boonlua, 2021).

The information was subsequently integrated into a WebGL-based 3D GIS and BIM environment covering the monument's core and buffer zones. This platform enables planners, local authorities, conservation professionals, residents, and other stakeholders to visualise existing urban conditions, examine proposed development scenarios, evaluate potential changes to the surrounding townscape, and participate more effectively in planning processes. The project therefore demonstrates how digital spatial planning can help reconcile heritage protection, community participation, urban development, and smart-city management in culturally sensitive areas (Boonlua, 2021).

Artificial intelligence further expands the analytical capacity of heritage-management systems. Computer vision and machine-learning techniques can assist with image classification, automatic identification of architectural elements, semantic segmentation of point-cloud data, detection of cracks or surface deterioration, reconstruction of incomplete objects, and analysis of large collections of heritage photographs. AI-assisted video analysis may also be used to estimate visitor density and identify spatial and temporal patterns of crowding. However, current AI applications may produce classification errors, culturally inaccurate reconstructions, biased interpretations, or results that are difficult for conservation professionals to verify. Consequently, AI should support rather than replace professional

expertise, community knowledge, and human judgement in heritage decision-making (Silva & Oliveira, 2024; Yu et al., 2025).

Smart visitor-management systems can integrate information from entrance-ticketing systems, environmental sensors, pedestrian counters, mobile applications, Wi-Fi or Bluetooth signals, GPS data, and computer-vision systems. These data can provide real-time information concerning visitor numbers, movement patterns, congestion points, transport conditions, and site capacity. Managers can then introduce timed-entry reservations, dynamic visitor routing, temporary access restrictions, alternative itineraries, or real-time notifications before physical and social carrying-capacity thresholds are exceeded. Studies of historic urban environments indicate that sensor-based monitoring and computer-vision analysis can provide detailed evidence about visitor concentration and spatial-temporal behaviour, supporting interventions that protect heritage resources while maintaining visitor comfort and experience quality (Ding et al., 2023; Viñals et al., 2024).

Despite these opportunities, smart heritage management should not be treated solely as a technological undertaking. Effective implementation requires interoperable data standards, reliable metadata, long-term digital preservation, cybersecurity, protection of visitor privacy, institutional capacity, specialised personnel, and sufficient financial resources. Digital representations must also preserve cultural authenticity and clearly distinguish documented evidence from hypothetical

reconstruction. Most importantly, communities and cultural custodians should participate in decisions regarding which cultural information is documented, how it is interpreted, who controls the data, and how digital heritage is accessed and reused. Digital technologies can therefore strengthen heritage conservation and visitor management most effectively when they operate within transparent, participatory, ethically responsible, and culturally sensitive governance frameworks (Penjor et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2026; Yu et al., 2025).

5.5.9 Heritage Preservation as Cultural Capital Management

Heritage preservation should be understood not merely as the physical protection of monuments or the continuation of traditional practices, but as the strategic management and intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. Historical monuments, sacred places, archaeological sites, cultural landscapes, festivals, craftsmanship, traditional knowledge, and community practices embody accumulated memory, knowledge, skills, values, identities, and symbolic meanings. Their significance therefore extends beyond their direct economic value to include educational, spiritual, social, historical, identity, and option values for both present and future generations. When the physical fabric, cultural setting, traditional knowledge, or communities responsible for maintaining heritage deteriorate, destinations lose not only irreplaceable cultural resources but also their capacity to create distinctive and meaningful tourism experiences (Geçikli et al., 2024; ICOMOS, 2022).

From a cultural-capital perspective, preservation represents a form of long-term investment. Financial, institutional, and human resources devoted to documentation, maintenance, restoration, safeguarding, interpretation, and knowledge transmission help sustain the cultural assets from which future social, cultural, and economic benefits may be generated. Unlike ordinary economic assets, however, many heritage resources are non-renewable. Once their authenticity, historical evidence, traditional knowledge, or cultural context has been seriously damaged, they may be impossible to reproduce. Preservation should therefore prioritise the retention of cultural significance rather than simply restoring the outward appearance of heritage resources or adapting them exclusively for commercial use.

Preservation can also strengthen destination competitiveness. Well-managed heritage creates distinctiveness, reinforces place identity, enhances destination image, and provides the foundation for high-quality cultural experiences. Research on heritage towns indicates that competitiveness depends not only on the presence of attractive monuments but also on integrated planning, conservation quality, stakeholder participation, accessibility, interpretation, and the ability to maintain heritage continuity amid urban and tourism development pressures (Nag & Mishra, 2023). Evidence from European regions further suggests that cultural World Heritage resources can contribute to regional economic resilience, although these benefits depend on the characteristics of tourism demand and the capacity of destinations to manage tourism sustainably (Muštra et al., 2023).

The relationship between preservation and competitiveness is also evident in the quality of visitor experiences. In Thailand, research on Dvaravati heritage destinations found that cultural and historical attributes contribute to destination image and memorable tourism experiences, which subsequently influence tourists' intentions to revisit. These findings suggest that preservation creates tourism value not simply by maintaining physical attractions but by enabling visitors to develop emotional, educational, and cultural connections with places (Chuamuangphan et al., 2025). Conversely, physical deterioration, visual intrusion, overcrowding, inappropriate commercialisation, loss of traditional practices, and poor interpretation can weaken destination image and reduce long-term tourism competitiveness.

Nevertheless, the transformation of heritage into tourism value must be carefully managed. Heritage preservation should not result in the freezing of living cultures, the displacement of local residents, or the conversion of sacred and culturally significant places into purely commercial attractions. The ICOMOS International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism recognises heritage as a common resource whose protection, governance, and enjoyment involve shared rights and responsibilities. It recommends placing heritage conservation at the centre of tourism planning, involving communities in decision-making, monitoring visitor impacts, managing carrying capacity, providing culturally sensitive interpretation, and distributing tourism benefits fairly among heritage custodians and local communities (ICOMOS, 2022).

Community participation is particularly important because cultural heritage is sustained through people rather than through physical conservation alone. Local residents, religious organisations, traditional practitioners, artisans, cultural bearers, and Indigenous or ethnic communities possess knowledge that may not be fully documented in official conservation records. Their participation can strengthen local ownership, social cohesion, knowledge transmission, and the legitimacy of heritage-management decisions. A study of creative and community-based tourism at the Ban Chiang World Heritage Site demonstrated that cultural capital can reinforce other forms of community capital, including social relationships, human capabilities, local livelihoods, environmental awareness, and community well-being, when heritage development is supported by local leadership and meaningful participation (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

Effective preservation must therefore be integrated with visitor management. Relevant measures may include visitor zoning, timed-entry systems, reservation requirements, pedestrian-flow management, temporary closure of vulnerable areas, codes of conduct, limits on commercial activities, continuous condition monitoring, and the reinvestment of tourism revenue in conservation and community development. Heritage interpretation is equally important because visitors are more likely to respect cultural resources when they understand their history, meanings, religious significance, and appropriate forms of behaviour. Interpretation should communicate not only the aesthetic qualities of heritage but also the voices, memories,

and contemporary concerns of the communities associated with it.

Climate change adds a further dimension to cultural-capital management. Flooding, extreme heat, storms, humidity, erosion, wildfire, and changing ecological conditions increasingly threaten both tangible and intangible heritage. UNESCO's *Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage* therefore calls for climate-risk assessment, disaster preparedness, adaptation, mitigation, monitoring, and the incorporation of traditional and local knowledge into heritage-management systems (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023). Climate adaptation should be treated as an essential component of preservation because the loss of heritage assets can also weaken community identity, livelihoods, social resilience, and the continuity of place-based knowledge.

Digital documentation, geographic information systems, three-dimensional models, environmental sensors, virtual interpretation, and data analytics can further assist conservation and visitor management. However, digital representation cannot replace the preservation of original heritage fabric, living traditions, cultural settings, or relationships between communities and places. Technology should function as a supporting instrument for documentation, monitoring, interpretation, and participation rather than as a substitute for professional conservation, community knowledge, or direct cultural experience.

Heritage preservation may also contribute to national image and soft power. Historic sites, religious traditions,

festivals, arts, craftsmanship, cuisine, and cultural landscapes can communicate national identity and cultural distinctiveness to international audiences. Heritage diplomacy demonstrates how cultural resources can be mobilised to promote international recognition, cultural exchange, tourism, and geopolitical influence (Mozaffari & Akbar, 2024). Nevertheless, sustainable soft power cannot be created through promotion alone. It depends on the credibility, authenticity, accessibility, and ethical management of the cultural resources being presented. Cultural diplomacy is most effective when it supports genuine intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding rather than treating heritage solely as a promotional instrument (UNESCO, 2022).

For Thailand, heritage preservation is particularly important because tangible and intangible cultural resources form a major foundation of the country's tourism identity and cultural attractiveness. Historical cities, archaeological sites, Buddhist temples, sacred landscapes, traditional architecture, festivals, foodways, craftsmanship, performing arts, and community lifestyles generate interconnected economic, social, spiritual, and symbolic values. These resources should therefore be managed as living cultural capital rather than as static tourism commodities.

The long-term sustainability of Thailand's heritage depends on management approaches that protect cultural significance while enabling meaningful public access and appreciation. This requires cooperation among government agencies, local authorities, religious institutions, tourism

organisations, conservation professionals, educational institutions, private businesses, and local communities. Preservation, visitor management, community participation, culturally sensitive interpretation, climate adaptation, and digital innovation must operate as interconnected components of cultural-capital management. Through such an integrated approach, Thailand can protect its heritage for future generations while strengthening destination competitiveness, community resilience, sustainable tourism development, and responsible cultural soft power.

Chapter 6
Gastronomy, Wellness, and Sports Tourism as Soft Power

6.1 Thai Cuisine as Cultural Capital

Food is a visible and accessible expression of culture. Cuisine reflects history, environmental adaptation, social values, local resources, and cultural identity. Culinary traditions also preserve knowledge of ingredients, production, preparation, presentation, and consumption practices transmitted across generations. Cuisine can therefore be understood as cultural capital that generates both cultural and economic value through tourism, agriculture, hospitality, creative industries, and international trade (Bourdieu, 1986; Throsby, 2020).

In Thailand, cuisine is one of the country's most internationally recognised cultural assets. Thai food communicates aspects of Thai history, hospitality, creativity, agricultural diversity, and everyday life to global audiences **(Figure 89)**. Through restaurants, food products, cooking schools, street food, festivals, and digital media, Thai cuisine contributes to destination branding, gastronomy tourism, cultural diplomacy, and national soft power (Rockower, 2012).

Thai cuisine is characterised by the combination and balance of sweet, sour, salty, bitter, spicy, aromatic, and umami elements. However, balance does not require every dish to contain all flavours equally. It often emerges through the relationship among dishes served together as a *samrap*, in which

curries, soups, relishes, vegetables, and other preparations create complementary tastes, textures, and aromas (Soontrunnarudrungsri et al., 2026).



Figure 89. Lifestyle Thai Cuisine
Source: hot-thai-kitchen.com

Regional diversity further strengthens Thailand's culinary cultural capital. Northern cuisine reflects Lanna traditions and uses glutinous rice, herbs, fermented ingredients, and influences from neighbouring cultures. Northeastern or Isan cuisine is associated with glutinous rice, *pla ra*, seasonal vegetables, grilled foods, and Lao and Khmer cultural influences. Southern cuisine reflects maritime trade, tropical agriculture, seafood, spices, coconut, and Malay-Muslim traditions. Central Thai

cuisine developed through river-basin agriculture, royal traditions, urban markets, migration, and international trade.

These regional cuisines should not be regarded as fixed or completely separate traditions. Ingredients, cooking techniques, and dishes continuously circulate between regions and communities. Thai culinary authenticity therefore involves continuity, local knowledge, ingredients, preparation methods, cultural context, and meaningful connections with place rather than strict conformity to a single recipe (Na Nakornphanom Chaipatiyutpong et al., 2026).

Thai cuisine also creates memorable tourism experiences. Market visits, cooking classes, food festivals, community dining, and interactions with producers allow tourists to engage with local culture through multiple senses. Such experiences can strengthen destination image, visitor satisfaction, place attachment, and intentions to share or revisit the destination (Soonsan & Somkai, 2023).

At the international level, Thai restaurants operate as informal spaces of cultural communication. Thailand's gastrodiplomacy and initiatives such as Thai SELECT have supported the international recognition of Thai cuisine, tourism, food exports, and national image. However, international expansion must balance quality standards with regional diversity, culinary creativity, and cultural authenticity.

Thai cuisine should therefore be managed as living cultural capital. Its long-term value depends on transmitting culinary knowledge, protecting food biodiversity, supporting

farmers and small producers, preserving regional traditions, and ensuring that tourism and commercial development benefit the communities responsible for maintaining Thailand's culinary heritage.

6.1.1 Thai Cuisine as Economic and Tourism Capital

Beyond its cultural significance, Thai cuisine generates economic value through tourism expenditure, employment, entrepreneurship, agriculture, food production, hospitality, and international trade. It demonstrates how culinary cultural capital can be transformed into market value while strengthening Thailand's destination identity.

Gastronomy is increasingly an important component of travel motivation and destination experience. Tourists seek local dishes, markets, cooking classes, food festivals, and interactions with producers as ways of experiencing Thai culture. Sensory appeal, authenticity, social interaction, and cultural learning make these experiences memorable and can strengthen satisfaction, destination image, revisit intention, and positive word of mouth (García-Pérez & Castillo-Ortiz, 2024).

Street food is particularly important to Thailand's tourism economy because it provides affordable and direct engagement with local culture. Research shows that the cultural experience, sensory appeal, food safety, service, physical environment, menu variety, and perceived price of Thai street food influence tourists' involvement and repurchase intentions (Jeaheng et al., 2023). Street-food districts and local markets also support small

businesses and contribute to the distinctive atmosphere of tourism destinations.

Gastronomy tourism creates wider economic benefits through supply chains involving farmers, fishers, food processors, market vendors, restaurants, transport providers, guides, and tourism businesses. Initiatives promoting local restaurants and regional dishes can direct visitors towards secondary destinations while increasing demand for locally sourced ingredients and inherited culinary knowledge (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024).

However, these benefits depend on maintaining food quality, safety, authenticity, local ownership, and fair participation in tourism value chains. Thai cuisine should therefore be developed not only as a tourism attraction but also as an economic ecosystem that supports local livelihoods, culinary entrepreneurship, regional identity, and sustainable destination development.

6.2 Gastronomic Tourism

Gastronomic tourism refers to travel in which food-related experiences form an important part of tourists' motivation and engagement with a destination. Authenticity, sensory appeal, social interaction, local culture, novelty, and meaningfulness are key components of memorable gastronomic experiences (García-Pérez & Castillo-Ortiz, 2024). Local cuisine can also strengthen destination branding, regional identity, and tourism competitiveness (Recuero-Virto & Valilla Arróspide, 2024).

Thailand is well positioned to develop gastronomic tourism through its regional cuisines, street food, local markets, restaurants, cooking classes, food festivals, and agricultural communities. These experiences allow visitors to learn about Thai culture through taste, ingredients, preparation techniques, storytelling, and interaction with local producers. Sustainable development should therefore connect tourism with local sourcing, food safety, cultural authenticity, entrepreneurship, and community participation.

Thailand's gastronomic tourism development is illustrated by the *Amazing Thailand Culinary City* initiative launched by the Tourism Authority of Thailand in 2023 **(Figure 90)**. The initiative applies the Bio-Circular-Green Economy framework through the "AGFEC" model: agriculture, gastronomy, food safety, experience, and creative entrepreneurship. Activities include culinary exhibitions, local ingredient showcases, regional hidden dishes, expert discussions, and traditional dessert workshops (Government Public Relations Department, 2023).



Figure 90. Amazing Thailand Culinary City
Source: thailand.go.th

Implemented in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Phuket, and Chanthaburi, the initiative connects regional food cultures with local wisdom, tourism businesses, and creative enterprise. It demonstrates how culinary resources can generate memorable visitor experiences while supporting regional economies and enhancing the international recognition of Thai cuisine (Government Public Relations Department, 2023).

6.2.1 Gastronomy as a Tourism Resource

Food is a valuable tourism resource because it is closely connected to local history, agriculture, environment, and cultural identity. These place-based characteristics help destinations differentiate themselves through distinctive dishes, ingredients, preparation methods, markets, restaurants, and dining traditions that cannot be easily reproduced elsewhere (Recuero-Virto & Valilla Arróspide, 2024).

Gastronomy also transforms local culture into participatory tourism experiences. Visitors can engage with destinations through tasting, cooking, storytelling, market visits, and interaction with producers and communities. Consequently, food contributes not only to destination attractiveness but also to cultural learning, emotional engagement, place branding, and tourism competitiveness (Richards, 2021).



Figure 91. Banthat Thong Road
Source: punpro.com and mgronline.com

Banthat Thong Road (**Figure 91)** illustrates how gastronomy can transform an urban district into a tourism destination. Formerly associated with automobile parts and repair businesses, the area has developed into a food corridor featuring long-established eateries, street food, contemporary restaurants, cafés, and dessert shops. Its central location, accessibility, and social media visibility encourage visitors to travel specifically for dining and shared culinary experiences (Boonlert, 2025; Sriangura, 2019).

Second, gastronomy connects tourism with agriculture, fisheries, food production, hospitality, transportation, retail, and creative industries. These linkages support local enterprises, strengthen food supply chains, and extend tourism expenditure across destination economies (Stalmirska, 2024).

Third, food functions as both a cultural attraction and a multisensory experience. Visitors engage through taste, smell, sight, texture, preparation, and social interaction, creating memorable experiences that can strengthen satisfaction, emotional well-being, and destination image (García-Pérez & Castillo-Ortiz, 2024; Yang et al., 2024).

6.2.2 Thailand's Gastronomic Tourism Landscape

Thailand has developed a strong international reputation as a gastronomic tourism destination. Its culinary appeal is supported by regional diversity, street-food culture, local markets, cooking schools, food festivals, community restaurants, and fine-dining establishments. The authenticity and cultural meaning of Thai cuisine also contribute to tourist satisfaction and destination branding (Na Nakornphanom Chaipatiyutpong et al., 2026).

Regional cuisine forms an important part of this tourism landscape. Northern Thailand is associated with dishes such as *khao soi* and *sai ua*, while Northeastern or Isan cuisine includes *som tam*, *larb*, fermented ingredients, and sticky rice. Central Thai cuisine features dishes such as *tom yum kung* and *pad Thai*, whereas Southern cuisine is distinguished by seafood, spices, coconut, and strongly flavoured curries. These traditions reflect differences in local environments, agricultural resources, trade histories, and cultural influences (Soontrunnarudrungsri et al., 2026).

Thailand's gastronomic tourism ecosystem connects food production, processing, restaurants, hospitality, transportation, markets, and tourism services. These linkages allow tourism expenditure to benefit farmers, food producers, vendors, restaurants, and small enterprises across the supply chain (Piboonrungroj et al., 2023).

The continued expansion of culinary routes and restaurant recognition into provincial destinations also encourages visitors to explore beyond established tourism centres. Gastronomy can

therefore support regional tourism dispersal, strengthen local identities, and create economic opportunities for communities when development maintains food quality, authenticity, and local participation (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2026).

6.2.3 Street Food Tourism

Street food is a defining feature of Thailand's gastronomic tourism. It provides visitors with affordable and direct access to everyday culinary culture through local dishes, informal dining environments, and interaction with vendors. These experiences allow tourists to engage with Thai culture through taste, smell, sight, preparation, and social exchange.

Research indicates that cultural experience, sensory appeal, food safety, service quality, menu variety, physical environment, and price value influence tourists' involvement and repurchase intentions (Jeaheng et al., 2023). Street-food experiences also strengthen perceived authenticity and behavioural intentions when they maintain distinctive flavours, quality, hygiene, and meaningful connections with local culture (Chompupor et al., 2026).



Figure 92. Street Food in Bangkok
Source: novotelbangkokplatinum.com

Street-food districts function as cultural landscapes where culinary traditions, local identities, entrepreneurship, and social interaction are maintained **(Figure 92)**. They support vendors and small businesses while contributing to destination attractiveness and community livelihoods. Their sustainable development requires cooperation among vendors, communities, local authorities, and tourism organisations, particularly in relation to hygiene, public space, accessibility, and fair regulation (Phukamchanoad, 2025).

International recognition has further increased the visibility of Thai street food. The *MICHELIN Guide Thailand 2026* includes street-food vendors and neighbourhood eateries within its national selection and Bib Gourmand category. Such recognition demonstrates how locally rooted culinary practices can gain international prestige while remaining accessible to visitors and local consumers (The MICHELIN Guide, 2025).

6.2.4 Culinary Experiences and Cultural Learning

Gastronomic tourism facilitates cultural learning because food reflects local history, environments, social practices, and cultural values. Culinary experiences allow visitors to understand destinations through ingredients, preparation methods, dining customs, and interaction with local people (Richards, 2021).

Cooking classes are particularly valuable because tourists actively participate in Thai culinary practices. They learn about ingredients, techniques, food histories, and cultural meanings while creating experiences together with instructors and other

participants. Research on cooking-class tourism in Thailand shows that such interaction supports cultural learning, social engagement, and value co-creation (Qian et al., 2023).

Food markets such as Or Tor Kor Market, Chiang Mai Gate Market, and community markets also provide opportunities to observe local ingredients, vendors, eating habits, and everyday lifestyles. These environments transform food purchasing and consumption into accessible forms of cultural education.

Yaowarat Road **(Figure 93)**, the main thoroughfare of Bangkok's Chinatown, demonstrates how cuisine, cultural heritage, and urban atmosphere can create a memorable learning experience. Its street vendors, traditional eateries, seafood restaurants, noodle shops, and dessert stalls reflect continuing interaction between Chinese culinary traditions and Thai ingredients and tastes. Food displays, architecture, languages, colours, and social activities collectively strengthen Yaowarat's distinctive tourism identity (Pan, 2025).

Yaowarat enables visitors to experience Thai-Chinese culture through food and direct interaction with a living historic neighbourhood. It also supports local businesses and strengthens Bangkok's image as a gastronomic destination.



Figure 93. Yaowarat Road, Bangkok's Chinatown
Source: novotelbangkokplatinum.com

6.3 Thai Food Diplomacy

Food has become an important instrument of cultural and public diplomacy because it enables foreign audiences to encounter a country through familiar, sensory, and everyday experiences. Gastrodiplomacy uses national cuisine to strengthen cultural recognition, nation branding, emotional connections, and soft power while supporting tourism and food-related industries (Li & Mok, 2025; Rockower, 2012).

Thailand is widely recognised as one of the earliest and most frequently studied practitioners of gastrodiplomacy. Through the *Global Thai* and *Kitchen of the World* strategies, the government supported the international expansion of Thai restaurants and promoted Thai cuisine as a representation of national culture. Overseas restaurants consequently function as informal cultural contact points while increasing interest in Thailand, Thai ingredients, tourism, and food exports (Rockower, 2012).

The Thai SELECT programme further supports this strategy by certifying Thai restaurants and food products that meet standards for authentic Thai taste and quality. Such institutional recognition strengthens consumer confidence and helps maintain the identity of Thai cuisine in international markets (Department of International Trade Promotion, 2026).



Figure 94. Thailand Gastrodiplomacy
Source: thailand.go.th

Recent initiatives have expanded Thai gastrodiplomacy by promoting local chefs, indigenous ingredients, regional knowledge, and contemporary culinary creativity. These activities demonstrate how Thai culinary heritage can be transformed into interconnected cultural, economic, tourism, and diplomatic value **(Figure 94)** (Government Public Relations Department, 2025).

However, effective gastrodiplomacy requires more than international popularity. Long-term influence depends on credible cultural representation, consistent quality, regional diversity, sustainable sourcing, and benefits for farmers, chefs,

producers, and local communities. Thai food diplomacy should therefore be managed as a strategic form of cultural-capital conversion rather than merely as culinary promotion.

6.3.1 Food Diplomacy and Soft Power

Soft power is based on attraction generated through culture, values, policies, and international reputation. Cuisine contributes to soft power by creating accessible sensory and emotional encounters that make a country and its culture more familiar to foreign audiences (Li & Mok, 2025; Nye, 2004).

Gastrodiplomacy refers to the strategic promotion of national cuisine to international publics. Unlike traditional diplomacy, it operates through restaurants, culinary events, food festivals, chefs, media, diaspora communities, and tourism experiences. These everyday interactions can strengthen cultural recognition, nation branding, and interest in a country's wider traditions and society (Li & Mok, 2025; Rockower, 2012).

In tourism, national cuisine contributes to destination image by communicating authenticity, cultural identity, and local distinctiveness. Positive food experiences can enhance tourist satisfaction, emotional connections, and behavioural intentions. Food diplomacy and tourism therefore reinforce one another: international familiarity with Thai cuisine may stimulate travel interest, while tourism experiences can deepen appreciation of Thai food and culture **(Figure 95)** (Recuero-Virto & Valilla Arróspide, 2024; Yang et al., 2024).



Figure 95. Thailand-based Ingredients
Source: tatreviewmagazine.com

6.3.2 The Origins of Thai Food Diplomacy

Thai food diplomacy became formalised in 2002 when the government launched the *Global Thai* programme. The initiative promoted Thai cuisine overseas to attract tourists, support food-related industries, expand exports, and strengthen international familiarity with Thailand (Li & Mok, 2025).

The programme encouraged the expansion of Thai restaurants abroad and promoted the use of Thai ingredients in international markets. Thai restaurants consequently became accessible cultural contact points through which foreign

consumers could experience Thai flavours, hospitality, and identity. Government support since 2002 contributed to an increase from approximately 5,500 overseas Thai restaurants to 17,478 restaurants worldwide by 2024 (Government Public Relations Department, 2024).

The related *Thailand: Kitchen of the World* strategy positioned Thailand as a major producer, processor, exporter, and promoter of quality food **(Figure 96).** While *Global Thai* focused primarily on expanding Thai cuisine and restaurants internationally, *Kitchen of the World* emphasised Thailand's agricultural resources, food-processing capacity, culinary heritage, ingredients, and export potential (SEAMEO Regional Centre for Food and Nutrition, 2024).



Figure 96. Thailand: Kitchen of the World
Source: seameo-recfon.org

Together, these initiatives demonstrate the conversion of culinary cultural capital into economic and diplomatic value. Thai cuisine supports food exports, restaurant businesses, tourism promotion, national branding, and cultural soft power while increasing global recognition of Thailand.

6.3.3 The Global Thai Program and Culinary Expansion

The *Global Thai* Program supported overseas restaurant expansion through business guidance, culinary standards, training, ingredient sourcing, and financial assistance. EXIM Thailand also provided loans to qualified Thai entrepreneurs investing in restaurants abroad (Export-Import Bank of Thailand, 2026; Li & Mok, 2025).

Thai restaurants served not only as commercial enterprises but also as informal cultural ambassadors. Through food, service, restaurant design, and interaction with staff, international consumers encountered Thai ingredients, cooking techniques, hospitality, and cultural identity. The programme therefore connected restaurant development with tourism promotion, food exports, nation branding, and soft power.

Thailand's strategy became an influential model for later gastrodiplomacy initiatives. Countries including South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Japan subsequently developed programmes promoting national cuisine to foreign audiences, demonstrating the growing importance of food in public diplomacy (Li & Mok, 2025; Rockower, 2012).

6.3.4 Thai SELECT and Culinary Quality Assurance

Thai SELECT is a certification mark awarded by Thailand's Ministry of Commerce to Thai restaurants in Thailand and overseas, as well as selected Thai food products **(Figure 97)**. It aims to promote authentic Thai taste, quality, safety, and confidence among international consumers (Department of International Trade Promotion, 2026).



Figure 97. Thai Select Award by Categories
Source: tatreviewmagazine.com

The programme evaluates restaurants and products according to relevant standards, including taste, ingredients, preparation, service, and Thai culinary identity. Its tiered categories help consumers identify Thai dining experiences that meet recognised quality benchmarks.

Thai SELECT also supports Thailand's gastrodiplomacy by strengthening the international image of Thai cuisine. Encounters with certified restaurants abroad can function as preliminary cultural experiences, increasing familiarity with Thai food and creating positive associations with Thailand.

The programme further contributes to culinary preservation by encouraging consistency in Thai flavours and preparation. However, quality assurance should remain flexible enough to recognise regional diversity, culinary creativity, and the evolving nature of authentic Thai cuisine (Na Nakornphanom Chaipatiyutpong et al., 2026).

6.3.5 Food Diplomacy and Tourism Development

Food diplomacy and tourism are mutually reinforcing. International exposure to Thai cuisine increases familiarity with Thai culture and may stimulate interest in visiting Thailand. Tourism then allows visitors to experience Thai food in its cultural setting, strengthening the connections created through restaurants, media, and culinary promotion abroad (Li & Mok, 2025).

Pad Thai **(Figure 98)** illustrates how an iconic dish can support food diplomacy and tourism promotion. Developed through the Thai adaptation of Chinese-influenced rice noodles, Pad Thai became associated with Thai national identity and international perceptions of the country (Yao et al., 2024). Its accessibility and global presence in restaurants, street-food stalls, cooking classes, and culinary media make it a familiar introduction to Thai cuisine.



Figure 98. Pad Thai
Source: tatreviewmagazine.com

Positive culinary experiences can enhance satisfaction, place attachment, and behavioural intentions, including revisiting and recommending a destination (Akoğul & Selçuk, 2025). Visitors may also share their experiences through personal networks and digital media, extending the international reach of Thai food diplomacy.

Gastronomic tourism further supports restaurants, vendors, farmers, food processors, and related service businesses. Food diplomacy therefore generates cultural influence while contributing to tourism income, local supply chains, and broader economic development (Piboonrungroj et al., 2023).

6.3.6 Thai Food Future Directions

Thai food diplomacy has opportunities to expand through growing international interest in gastronomy, wellness, sustainability, and culturally meaningful experiences. Digital media, international chefs, restaurants, influencers, and diaspora communities can further increase the visibility of Thai cuisine among global audiences (Li & Mok, 2025).

Current government policy identifies food as one of Thailand's priority soft-power industries and aims to develop Thai cuisine as a global brand associated with gastronomy, sustainability, and wellness. The related 3S strategy emphasises food security, safety, and sustainability across the culinary value chain (Government Public Relations Department, 2024, 2025).

Future strategies should promote regional cuisines, local ingredients, culinary heritage, farm-to-table experiences, food-waste reduction, and stronger participation by farmers, chefs, entrepreneurs, and communities. Such approaches can distribute economic benefits while preserving cultural identity and supporting sustainable local food systems (Fernández & Irimia-Diéguez, 2025; Thelen & Kim, 2024).

Thailand should also evaluate the outcomes of food diplomacy rather than focusing only on promotional activities. Indicators may include international perceptions, tourism demand, food exports, local income, cultural preservation, and environmental performance. This integrated approach would strengthen the contribution of Thai cuisine to tourism, economic development, and national soft power.

6.4 Wellness Tourism

Wellness tourism refers to travel motivated by maintaining or enhancing personal well-being. It focuses on proactive physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual wellness rather than the treatment of illness associated with medical tourism. Global wellness-tourism expenditure reached approximately USD 894 billion in 2024, reflecting strong demand for preventive health, stress reduction, and meaningful travel experiences (Global Wellness Institute, 2026).

Thailand holds a strong position in this market. In 2024, the country ranked 15th globally for wellness tourism, with expenditure reaching USD 14 billion. Its competitive strengths include traditional Thai massage, herbal therapies, meditation, spa services, natural environments, wellness retreats, and preventive healthcare (GWI, 2026; Phuthong et al., 2023). Traditional Thai massage is particularly significant because UNESCO recognises it as part of the art, science, and culture of traditional Thai healthcare (UNESCO, 2019).







Figure 99. Phu Klon Hot Spring, Mae Hong Son
Source: khaosod.co.th

These practices represent cultural capital because they combine traditional knowledge, local ingredients, spirituality, hospitality, and healing traditions. When appropriately managed, they can generate tourism income, employment, entrepreneurship, and international recognition while preserving Thai cultural knowledge.

Mae Hong Son illustrates how natural resources can support place-based wellness tourism. Phu Klon **(Figure 99)** offers mineral mud treatments, hot-water bathing, massage, and spa experiences within a natural setting (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2021). Connecting these resources with local products, community enterprises, trained practitioners, and environmental management can strengthen the provincial economy while enhancing visitor well-being.

Wellness tourism should therefore create benefits for both visitors and host communities. Its long-term development requires service quality, professional standards, cultural authenticity, environmental protection, community participation, and the responsible use of local healing resources.

6.4.1 The Emergence of Wellness Tourism

Wellness tourism reflects a broader understanding of health that extends beyond the absence of disease. Contemporary well-being includes interconnected physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual, and environmental dimensions (World Health Organization, 2024).

This holistic perspective has increased demand for travel experiences that support relaxation, stress reduction, mindfulness, healthy lifestyles, personal growth, and preventive health. Global wellness-tourism expenditure reached USD 894 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach approximately USD 1.38 trillion by 2029 (Johnston, 2025).

Growth is driven by increasing health consciousness, population ageing, workplace stress, mental-health awareness, and post-pandemic interest in preventive care. Wellness tourism has also expanded through its integration with nature, meditation, traditional healing, hot springs, healthy food, cultural experiences, and spiritual retreats (Tripathi & Ben Said, 2023).

6.4.2 Thailand's Position in the Global Wellness Tourism Market

Thailand has established a strong position in the Asian wellness tourism market. Its competitiveness is supported by a combination of traditional healing knowledge, hospitality, natural resources, medical infrastructure, skilled practitioners, and internationally recognized service quality (Global Wellness Institute, 2024; Phuthong et al., 2023).

International visitors are attracted by Thailand's diverse wellness offerings, including spa resorts, holistic retreats, meditation programmes, herbal therapies, medical wellness, and nature-based experiences. Traditional Thai massage **(Figure 100)** is particularly important because it represents both a tourism product and a form of intangible cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO (2019).



Figure 100. Traditional Thai Massage
Source: pattayamail.com

Thailand's wellness tourism landscape also includes a wide range of providers that combine hospitality, preventive health, and holistic care. RAKxa Integrative Wellness (**Figure 101)** illustrates the medical wellness segment by combining health assessment, personalised programmes, and integrative therapies. THANN Wellness Destination **(Figure 102)** reflects a holistic retreat model that brings together spa treatments, healthy cuisine, mindfulness, and natural surroundings. BDMS Wellness Clinic **(Figure 103)** demonstrates Thailand's strength in preventive and medical wellness through services such as health screening, rehabilitation, and personalised health programmes (BDMS Wellness Clinic, 2026; RAKxa Integrative Wellness, 2026; THANN Wellness Destination, 2026).



Figure 101. RAKxa Integrative Wellness
Source: wellbeingescapes.com





Figure 102. THANN Wellness Destination
Source: booking.com

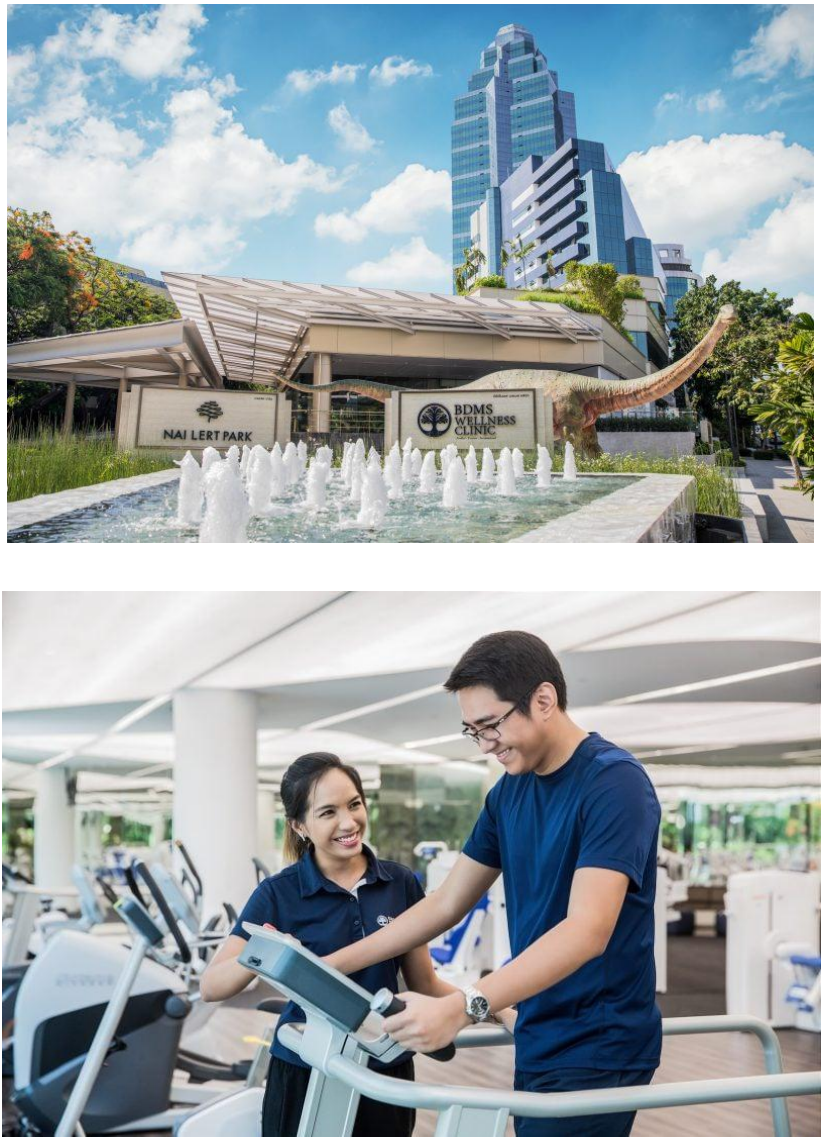


Figure 103. BDMS Wellness Clinic
Source: brandinside.asia

Wellness tourism also supports Thailand's strategy to attract higher-value visitors. Compared with mass-market segments, wellness travellers often seek longer stays, personalised services, and higher-quality experiences. As a result, wellness tourism contributes not only to visitor well-being but also to destination competitiveness, service innovation, and sustainable tourism development (GWI, 2024; Phuthong et al., 2023).

6.4.3 Wellness, Spirituality, and Mindfulness

Thailand's wellness tourism is closely connected with spirituality and mindfulness. Many Thai wellness traditions combine physical health with mental balance, emotional awareness, compassion, and spiritual well-being, reflecting the influence of Buddhist philosophy and meditation practices.

Meditation retreats, temple stays, mindfulness programmes, and contemplative activities allow visitors to pursue relaxation, self-awareness, and personal growth. Research in Thailand indicates that meditation-retreat participants perceive benefits particularly for mental well-being, together with spiritual and physical well-being (Piuchan, 2021).

Thailand's Buddhist temples, religious heritage, experienced teachers, and established tourism infrastructure also support its development as a spiritual and mindfulness destination. Chiang Mai, for example, attracts international visitors seeking to learn about Buddhism and participate in

mindfulness practices within culturally meaningful settings (Choe & O'Regan, 2020).

These experiences may become transformative when reflection and learning lead to lasting changes in tourists' perspectives, behaviours, and sense of purpose. Transformative tourism can support both immediate enjoyment and longer-term eudaimonic well-being associated with meaning and personal development (Huang et al., 2024). However, development should respect sacred environments, religious communities, and the cultural integrity of Buddhist practices.

6.5 Forest Bathing and Nature-Based Well-being

Forest bathing, derived from the Japanese concept of *shinrin-yoku*, involves mindful immersion in a natural environment through sight, sound, smell, touch, and other sensory experiences. Unlike hiking or exercise-focused activities, it emphasises slowing down, sensory awareness, reflection, and connection with nature.

Growing interest in forest bathing reflects concerns about urbanisation, stress, mental health, and declining contact with nature. Exposure to forests and green spaces is associated with stress reduction, improved mood, cognitive restoration, mindfulness, and well-being. However, recent reviews note that stronger controlled and long-term studies are still required (Szitás et al., 2024; World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2026).



Figure 104. Forest Bathing Activity
Source: human.ku.ac.th

Thailand's forests, national parks, community landscapes, and contemplative traditions provide opportunities to integrate forest bathing with wellness and sustainable tourism. Related experiences may include mindfulness walks, outdoor meditation, ecological retreats, and therapeutic activities in natural settings **(Figure 104)**.

The Forest Bathing Centre of the Lifelong Learning Institute, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, develops multisensory and interdisciplinary well-being programmes. Its activities integrate forest bathing with breathing practices, water and massage therapies, healthy food, sleep rituals, parasympathetic recovery, and music therapy (Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, 2026, 2026).

Forest bathing can also support environmental learning when programmes include interpretation and responsible visitor practices. Evidence from nature-based tourism suggests that well-designed environmental communication can strengthen pro-environmental intentions and behaviour, although outcomes vary according to programme design and visitor context (He et al., 2023). Forest bathing tourism can therefore connect visitor well-being with environmental education, community enterprise, and conservation **(Figure 105)**.



Figure 105. Nature Connectedness through Forest Bathing
Source: human.ku.ac.th

6.6 Muay Thai as a Sports Tourism

Muay Thai **(Figure 106)** is one of Thailand's most recognisable cultural symbols and an important component of its sports tourism and soft-power strategies. Known as the *"Art of Eight Limbs,"* it combines combat techniques with cultural elements such as *wai khru ram muay*, traditional music, ceremonial dress, discipline, and respect for teachers. Muay Thai therefore functions as both a modern sport and living cultural heritage.



Figure 106. Traditional Muay Thai
Source: salika.co

International visitors travel to Thailand to train at Muay Thai camps, attend competitions, and experience the sport in its cultural setting. Research indicates that participants are

motivated by skill development, fitness, self-enrichment, cultural learning, and the search for distinctive experiences (Pookaiyaudom, 2020; Satchapappichit & Iesue, 2022). Extended participation can also support sociocultural adaptation and stronger engagement with Thai communities (Soontayatron, 2025).

Thailand has more than 5,000 Muay Thai camps and gyms, particularly in destinations such as Bangkok, Phuket, Chiang Mai, and Pattaya. These facilities serve professional fighters and recreational tourists while supporting accommodation, transport, equipment businesses, trainers, and local services (TAT, 2026).



Figure 107. Thai Fight Competition
Source: salika.co

Competitions such as THAI FIGHT **(Figure 107)** combine professional sport, cultural rituals, entertainment, and destination promotion. Together with the World Wai Khru Muay Thai Ceremony and Amazing Muay Thai events, they attract participants and spectators while generating tourism expenditure and strengthening Thailand's international sporting image **(Figure 108)** (Government Public Relations Department, 2025; TAT, 2024).

Muay Thai also contributes to soft power through international competitions, training centres, films, documentaries, television, gaming, and digital media. These channels increase awareness of Thai culture while supporting tourism, sporting products, and creative industries.

Muay Thai demonstrates how cultural capital can generate sporting, tourism, economic, health, and symbolic value. Its sustainable development requires qualified trainers, safety standards, culturally respectful interpretation, fair benefits for local camps, and continued protection of traditional knowledge and rituals.





Figure 108. Muay Thai Documentary
Source: th.fairtex.com

Chapter 7
Creative Tourism and Community-Based Tourism

7.1 Creative Tourism Concepts

Creative tourism has emerged in response to growing demand for meaningful, participatory, and culturally engaging travel. Unlike conventional cultural tourism based mainly on observation, it enables visitors to develop knowledge and skills through active involvement in local creative activities (Benhaida et al., 2024).

Creative tourists may participate in handicraft workshops, cooking, music, dance, storytelling, design, or other cultural practices. Through interaction with artists, artisans, and communities, tourists become co-creators rather than passive spectators. Participation, authenticity, cultural learning, and co-creation are therefore central themes in creative tourism (Sharma et al., 2024).

This approach reflects the experience economy, in which value is generated through engagement, learning, emotional connection, and personal development (Pine & Gilmore, 2019). Creative activities can provide tourists with memorable experiences while allowing communities to interpret and present their cultural heritage in contemporary ways.

For destinations, creative tourism can diversify tourism products, support local entrepreneurship, preserve cultural knowledge, and strengthen community identity. Evidence from Ban Chiang, Thailand, indicates that community-based creative tourism can contribute to cultural preservation, economic opportunities, community empowerment, and sustainable development (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025). Creative tourism therefore provides an important mechanism for transforming cultural capital into economic, social, and cultural value.

7.1.1 The Evolution of Creative Tourism

Creative tourism emerged from debates about the limitations of conventional cultural tourism, which often positioned tourists as passive observers of museums, monuments, and performances. Richards and Raymond (2000) introduced creative tourism as an approach that enables visitors to develop their creative potential through active participation in learning experiences characteristic of a destination **(Figure 109).**

This concept marked a shift from consuming cultural products to participating in cultural processes. Visitors engage directly with artists, artisans, chefs, performers, and community members through activities such as craft workshops, cooking, music, dance, farming, and storytelling. These experiences promote learning, skill development, cultural exchange, and co-creation.

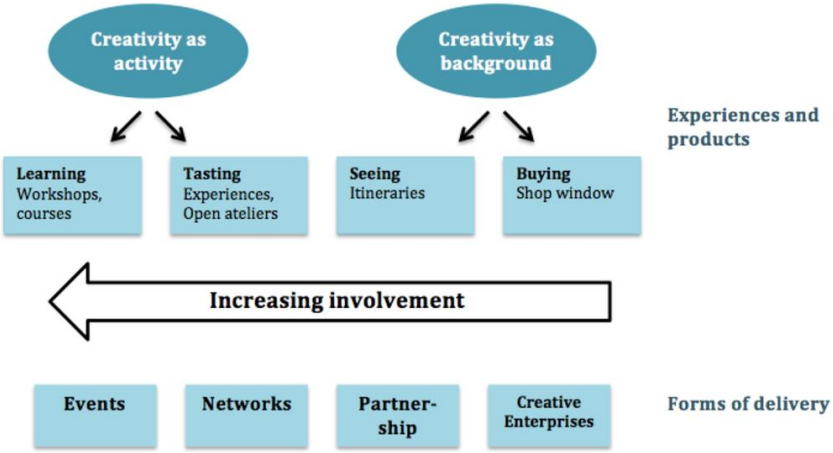


Figure 109. Creativity in Tourism
Source: Richards via s emanticscholar.org

Creative tourism has since expanded from individual activities into a broader destination-development and placemaking strategy. It can activate local knowledge, stories, cultural spaces, and creative industries while supporting tourism diversification and small enterprises. Effective development should remain sensitive to local contexts and allow communities to shape how their culture is interpreted and shared (Richards, 2020).

Recent research identifies participation, authenticity, creativity, experiential learning, and community engagement as central elements of creative tourism. When responsibly managed, it can strengthen local identity, support knowledge transmission, generate community income, and contribute to sustainable destination development (Benhaida et al., 2024).

7.1.2 Creative Tourism and the Experience Economy

Creative tourism is closely associated with the experience economy, in which value is created through memorable, personalised, and emotionally engaging experiences rather than goods and services alone (Pine & Gilmore, 2019). It responds to tourists' growing interest in authenticity, creativity, learning, and meaningful interaction with local communities.

Creative tourism may include craft workshops, cooking classes, music and dance activities, storytelling, photography, farming, and cultural design. These activities enable tourists to develop skills and co-create experiences with local artists, artisans, and residents (Deng et al., 2024).



Figure 110. Traditional Rice Winnowing
Source: inspiredthailand.com

Examples of creative tourism experiences include traditional craft workshops, culinary classes, music and dance training, artistic collaborations, cultural design projects, storytelling activities, photography experiences, and community-based cultural programs. These activities encourage tourists to develop skills, create products, and interact directly with local people and traditions.

Traditional rice winnowing **(Figure 110)** illustrates creative tourism through visitors' direct participation in traditional rice winnowing, a form of local agricultural knowledge passed down through generations. Rather than simply observing community life, tourists learn the technique from local residents, practise the activity, and interact with the people who preserve this knowledge. From an experience-economy perspective, the activity combines education, entertainment, cultural immersion, and an authentic rural setting. It therefore transforms local wisdom into a memorable and participatory tourism experience while supporting cultural transmission, community pride, and local economic opportunities.

In addition, Batik painting **(Figure 111)** illustrates how creative tourism transforms traditional craftsmanship into an engaging visitor experience. Tourists can learn about local motifs, colour selection, wax-resist dyeing techniques, and the cultural meanings represented in each design while interacting directly with community artisans. Batik-making combines education, aesthetic appreciation, cultural immersion, and hands-on creativity. The activity not only produces a memorable and personalised experience but also supports the transmission of

local knowledge, strengthens community identity, and creates income opportunities for local craft producers.



Figure 111. Batik Painting
Source: inspiredthailand.com

Active participation can strengthen learning, authenticity, emotional engagement, and the memorability of tourism experiences. Creative activities can also generate income for local producers and help communities preserve and reinterpret cultural knowledge in contemporary forms (Carvalho et al., 2024; Liu & Kou, 2024).

7.1.3 Cultural Capital and Creativity

Creative tourism is closely connected to cultural capital, including the knowledge, skills, traditions, values, and cultural resources accumulated within communities (Bourdieu, 1986). Crafts, cuisine, performing arts, stories, and local practices provide the foundation for creative tourism experiences.

These resources are often place-specific and difficult to replicate, helping destinations develop distinctive identities and competitive advantages. Through workshops and co-created activities, cultural knowledge can be transformed into tourism value while remaining connected to local people and places (Liu & Kou, 2024).

Cultural capital generates both cultural and economic value (Throsby, 2020). Creative tourism can support knowledge transmission, heritage preservation, employment, entrepreneurship, and community development. Evidence from Ban Chiang demonstrates how local cultural assets can be mobilised to strengthen community capabilities and sustainable tourism outcomes (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

Creative tourism treats culture as a living resource rather than a static product. Interaction between tradition and creativity allows communities to preserve cultural identity while adapting practices for contemporary audiences. However, innovation should remain culturally respectful and involve local custodians in deciding how their heritage is presented and commercialised.

7.1.4 Key Characteristics of Creative Tourism

Several characteristics distinguish creative tourism from other forms of tourism.

Key Characteristics	***Explanations***
1) Active Participation	Creative tourism requires active engagement by visitors. Tourists become participants rather than spectators, contributing directly to creative processes and cultural experiences.
2) Learning and Skill Development	Creative tourism emphasizes educational experiences. Visitors acquire knowledge, skills, and cultural understanding through practical involvement and experiential learning.
3) Co-Creation	Many creative tourism experiences involve collaboration between visitors and local communities. Experiences are co-created through interaction, dialogue, and shared activities rather than delivered as standardized products.
4) Authenticity	Creative tourism often relies upon local cultural resources, traditions, and identities. Experiences are embedded within specific social and cultural contexts, enhancing authenticity and distinctiveness.
5) Small-Scale Development	Creative tourism frequently occurs within community settings, workshops, studios, cultural centers, and local enterprises. This characteristic often supports more sustainable and inclusive forms of tourism development.

7.1.5 Creative Tourism in Thailand

Thailand has considerable potential for creative tourism because of its cultural diversity, traditional knowledge, artistic heritage, and creative industries. Crafts, cuisine, performing arts, wellness practices, festivals, and community lifestyles provide resources for participatory tourism experiences.

Examples include textile weaving, pottery, Thai cooking, fruit carving, batik painting, traditional music, Muay Thai training, and wellness workshops. These activities allow visitors to learn directly from artisans and community members while supporting cultural transmission, local identity, and income generation. Evidence from Ban Chiang demonstrates that community-based creative tourism can contribute to heritage revitalisation, community capabilities, and sustainable development (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).



Figure 112. Creative Economy Agency Office
Source: designinspire.hktdc.com

The Creative Economy Agency (Public Organization), or CEA **(Figure 112)**, supports Thailand's creative economy by developing creative professionals, entrepreneurs, districts, and collaborative networks. Its design weeks, exhibitions, and district-development initiatives connect local heritage, contemporary design, urban spaces, and creative businesses (Creative Economy Agency, 2026, 2026).

These initiatives can support creative tourism by transforming cultural resources into participatory experiences and revitalising local areas. However, development should involve cultural custodians and ensure that tourism benefits local communities rather than treating cultural practices solely as commercial products.

7.2 Arts, Crafts, and Cultural Industries

Arts, crafts, and cultural industries are important forms of cultural capital because they embody community knowledge, creativity, skills, values, and identity. They generate cultural and economic value through tourism, employment, entrepreneurship, trade, and destination branding (UNESCO, 2022; UN Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024).

Arts and crafts combine tangible products, such as textiles, ceramics, sculptures, and decorative objects, with intangible knowledge, including techniques, designs, stories, and cultural meanings. Their place-specific character enables destinations to offer distinctive experiences that are difficult to reproduce elsewhere.

In Thailand, handicrafts, textiles, performing arts, fashion, design, film, music, and digital media reflect regional diversity and long traditions of cultural exchange. These industries strengthen Thailand's tourism identity while creating opportunities for artisans, designers, communities, and creative entrepreneurs.

Figure 113. SACIT Logo
Source: sacit.or.th

The Sustainable Arts and Crafts Institute of Thailand (Public Organization), or SACIT **(Figure 113)**, preserves traditional knowledge, supports master artisans and younger practitioners, develops craft quality and innovation, and expands domestic and international markets. Its exhibitions, craft shops, training programmes, and community networks connect traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design and sustainable enterprise (SACIT, 2026).



Figure 114. SACIT Suvarnabhumi Airport Branch
Source: sacit.or.th

The *SACIT Craft Power Event* **(Figure 114-115)** further demonstrates the institute's role in strengthening Thailand's cultural and creative industries. The event brings together artisans, designers, researchers, experts, entrepreneurs, and younger creators to exchange knowledge and examine emerging craft trends. It encourages the adaptation of local wisdom through contemporary design, innovation, sustainability, and

market development, helping transform Thai craftsmanship into economic, social, and soft-power value (SACIT, 2025).



Figure 115. SACIT Craft Power Event
Source: naewna.com

For tourism destinations, SACIT Craft Power and related craft initiatives create opportunities for exhibitions, demonstrations, workshops, storytelling, and interaction with artisans. These activities strengthen visitor engagement, transmit cultural knowledge, enhance artisan livelihoods, and increase the visibility of Thai crafts in domestic and international markets (Liu & Kou, 2024).

7.2.1 The One Tambon One Product (OTOP) Initiative

The One Tambon One Product (OTOP) initiative is one of Thailand's most significant programmes for developing local cultural industries. Initiated in 2001, it encourages communities to transform local knowledge, natural resources, craftsmanship, and cultural identity into distinctive products and services that generate employment and income (Community Development Department, 2026; Natsuda et al., 2012).



Figure 116. OTOP Logo
Source: thailand.go.th

OTOP products include textiles, handicrafts, food, beverages, herbal products, decorative objects, and cultural souvenirs. Government support includes skills training, product development, quality standards, technology, branding,

packaging, and access to domestic and international markets (Government Public Relations Department, 2023).

The programme transforms cultural capital into economic value while preserving local skills and identities. Current initiatives also encourage younger entrepreneurs to combine traditional knowledge with contemporary design, sustainable production, storytelling, and digital marketing (Community Development Department, 2025).



Figure 117. OTOP Marketing Event
Source: kyotoreview.org

From a tourism perspective, OTOP products provide visitors with tangible connections to local culture. Marketing events, community shops, demonstrations, and workshops can support cultural learning while directing tourism expenditure towards artisans, producers, and community enterprises **(Figure 116-117)**.

Research indicates that sustainable OTOP tourism depends on interconnected development of community capacity, attractions, products, services, and marketing. Meaningful

community participation is particularly important for generating employment, strengthening the grassroots economy, and protecting cultural resources (Suthivorapongsri et al., 2023).

7.3 Film and Media Tourism

Film and media increasingly influence destination image and travel behaviour. Audiences encounter places through films, television series, streaming platforms, documentaries, social media, travel videos, and other digital content before visiting them. Visual narratives can create emotional connections, strengthen destination appeal, and stimulate travel intentions (Kim et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024).

Film-induced tourism refers to travel motivated wholly or partly by locations, landscapes, cultures, or stories presented in films and television programmes. The broader concept of screen tourism also includes streaming content and other audiovisual productions that encourage audiences to experience represented places in the physical world (Beeton, 2016; Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025).



Figure 118. Film Shooting in Thailand
Source: bangkokpost.com

For Thailand, international productions and locally created media communicate landscapes, heritage, cuisine, lifestyles, and hospitality to global audiences **(Figure 118)**. Film incentives and destination-promotion partnerships have strengthened Thailand's position as a production location while supporting tourism, creative employment, and national soft power (Ainslie, 2025).

Media tourism now extends beyond professional productions. Social media, influencers, travel vloggers, short-form videos, gaming, and user-generated content continually reshape destination images and visitor expectations. These

channels allow audiences to discover, interpret, and share tourism places through interconnected digital narratives.

Film and media tourism can support destination branding, creative industries, filming-location tours, and local businesses. However, destinations should manage possible overcrowding, environmental pressure, cultural misrepresentation, and differences between mediated images and local realities. Effective planning should therefore connect media promotion with community participation, cultural integrity, and sustainable visitor management.

7.3.1 Film Tourism and Thailand

Thailand has long been an attractive location for international film productions because of its diverse landscapes, cultural heritage, production capabilities, and competitive costs. Beaches, islands, forests, mountains, historic sites, and urban environments provide a wide range of filming settings. These advantages, together with government support and film incentives, have strengthened Thailand's position as a regional production hub.

Film productions contribute to tourism by exposing international audiences to Thai destinations, landscapes, and cultural settings. This exposure can enhance destination awareness, shape destination image, and stimulate travel interest (Beeton, 2016; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). In Thailand, film production therefore contributes not only to the creative

economy and employment but also to destination promotion and tourism development.

One of the most frequently cited examples is *The Beach* (2000) **(Figure 119)**, which brought international attention to Maya Bay on Phi Phi Leh Island in Krabi Province. The film significantly increased awareness of the destination and demonstrated how screen exposure can stimulate tourism demand (Beeton, 2016).



Figure 119. The Beach (2000)
Source: imdb.com

Other well-known examples include *The Hangover Part II* (2011) **(Figure 120)** and *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974) **(Figure 121)**, both of which contributed to the visibility of Thai destinations among global audiences. These productions illustrate how films can transform locations into symbolic tourism attractions associated with particular stories and visual imagery.



Figure 120. The Hangover Part II (2011)
Source: almostginger.comand nachrichten.at



Figure 121. The Man with the Golden Gun (1974)
Source: 007magazine.co.uk

In the contemporary media environment, streaming platforms have further expanded the influence of screen tourism. Global services such as Netflix, HBO, and Disney+ distribute content to large international audiences, allowing destinations featured in successful series to gain rapid visibility and tourism interest. This process is often described as the "streaming effect," in which screen exposure influences destination appeal and behavioural intention (Kim et al., 2024).

A recent example is *The White Lotus* Season 3 (**Figure 122)**, which has drawn international attention to Thailand as a luxury tourism destination. Anticipation surrounding the series illustrates how contemporary media tourism now operates through global streaming platforms, digital audiences, and fan communities as well as through traditional cinema.



Figure 122. The White Lotus Season 3 (2025)
Source: designscene.net

These examples show that film and screen productions can generate publicity beyond conventional destination marketing. However, effective film tourism development should also consider issues such as visitor concentration, local community impacts, and the gap between mediated images and actual destination realities. When appropriately managed, film tourism can strengthen Thailand's destination image, support local economies, and enhance the country's soft power.

7.3.2 Thai Cinema and Cultural Representation

Thai cinema contributes to cultural representation by communicating the country's traditions, beliefs, landscapes, language, social relations, and contemporary issues to domestic and international audiences. Both commercial and independent productions can strengthen awareness of Thai culture while presenting diverse perspectives on Thai society.

Ong-Bak (2003) **(Figure 123)** is a notable example. The film introduced international audiences to Muay Thai, Buddhist symbolism, rural community life, and values associated with discipline and moral responsibility. Its international success increased the visibility of Thai action cinema and reinforced Muay Thai as a symbol of Thai identity (Vail, 2014).



Figure 123. Ong-Bak (2003)
Source: sahamongkolfilm.com

From a cultural-capital perspective, cinema transforms stories, performing arts, music, locations, and social identities into creative products. These representations can contribute to nation branding, destination image, tourism interest, and cultural soft power (Gupta et al., 2020; Kemachadakorn & Pintong, 2024).

However, films are selective cultural representations rather than complete reflections of society. Support for Thai cinema should therefore encourage cultural diversity, creative freedom, production quality, international distribution, and responsible representation.

7.4 Community Cultural Capital

Community cultural capital is one of the most important resources in tourism development. Beyond physical attractions and infrastructure, communities possess cultural assets that shape destination identity, visitor experience, and long-term sustainability. These assets include local knowledge, traditions, customs, social relationships, collective memory, artistic practices, culinary heritage, and community ways of life (OECD, 2023).

Community cultural capital refers to the cultural resources, values, skills, and social networks embedded within local communities. These resources are accumulated over time and are sustained through everyday practice, participation, and intergenerational transmission. Because they are rooted in people and place, they are difficult to replicate and therefore provide strong foundations for cultural tourism, creative tourism, and community-based tourism (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

In Thailand, community cultural capital is especially significant because much of the country's tourism appeal is linked to local lifestyles **(Figure 124)**, cultural diversity, and community knowledge. Rural villages, fishing settlements **(Figure 125)**, traditional markets, agricultural landscapes, and ethnic communities all contribute to destination attractiveness through forms of cultural capital that extend beyond built heritage.



Figure 124. Rural Life in Thailand
Source: secret-retreats.com

Community cultural capital also strengthens collective identity, social cohesion, and resilience. Oral histories, local beliefs, craftsmanship, performing arts, food traditions, and festivals not only enrich tourism experiences but also help communities maintain continuity while adapting to change (OECD, 2023).

Unlike individual cultural capital, community cultural capital is collectively created and maintained. Its tourism value emerges through direct engagement with local people, shared practices, and participation in community life. For this reason, it offers a distinctive advantage in an era when tourists increasingly seek authentic, meaningful, and place-based experiences.



Figure 125. Fishing Settlement in Thailand
Source: secret-retreats.com

However, the use of community cultural capital in tourism requires careful management. If poorly managed, tourism may commodify local culture or distribute benefits unevenly. Effective development should therefore prioritise community participation, local control, cultural respect, and fair benefit sharing. When appropriately managed, community cultural capital can support cultural preservation, local livelihoods, and sustainable destination development (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

7.5 Cultural Entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship refers to the transformation of cultural knowledge, creativity, heritage, and artistic expression into products, services, and experiences that generate cultural, social, and economic value. Unlike conventional entrepreneurship, it does not focus exclusively on financial returns. Cultural entrepreneurs may also seek to preserve heritage, strengthen identity, support communities, and realise wider cultural values (Klamer, 2017).

Within tourism, cultural entrepreneurs develop craft workshops, culinary experiences, performances, festivals, wellness programmes, community tours, heritage interpretation, and digital content. They act as intermediaries between cultural custodians and markets by making local knowledge accessible to visitors while maintaining its connection with people and place.

Figure 126 presents cultural entrepreneurship through the interaction of creativity, marketing, and change. Creativity enables cultural traditions to be reinterpreted as new products or experiences. Marketing connects these offerings with suitable audiences, while change represents their adaptation to contemporary technologies, lifestyles, and markets (Rentschler, 2007).

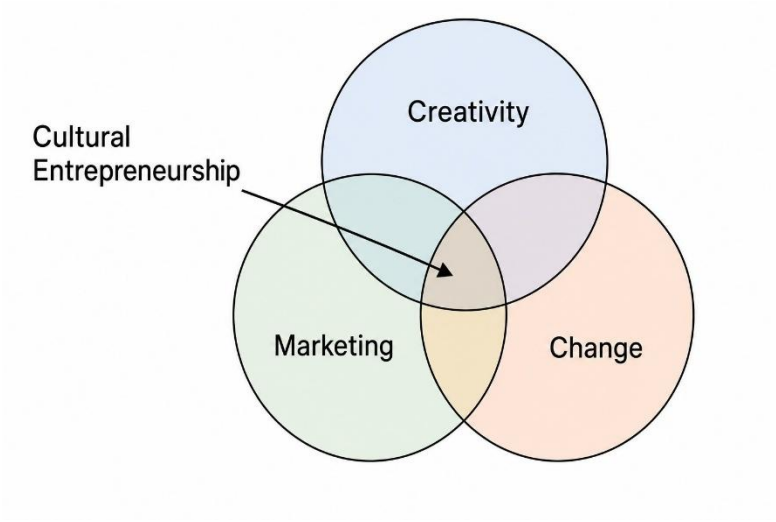


Figure 126. Elements of Cultural Entrepreneurship
Source: Rentschler (2007) via researchgate.net

Cultural entrepreneurship demonstrates the dual nature of cultural capital. A weaving enterprise, for example, may generate income while transmitting craft knowledge, whereas a culinary business may create tourism experiences while preserving regional food traditions. Cultural and creative industries therefore contribute to employment, innovation, trade, cultural diversity, and destination differentiation (Throsby, 2020; UNESCO, 2022; UN Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024).

Thailand provides many examples through crafts, gastronomy, festivals, film, music, fashion, wellness, design, performing arts, and Muay Thai. Current Thai soft-power development covers 14 creative industries and seeks to connect local creators with markets, investors, skills development, and

international audiences (Government Public Relations Department, 2025). Cultural entrepreneurs are therefore important to transforming Thai cultural resources into tourism experiences and internationally recognised creative products.

Cultural entrepreneurship can be especially valuable in rural and community settings. Local enterprises can create income, retain cultural skills, engage younger generations, and reduce dependence on standardised tourism products. However, communities and cultural custodians should participate in decisions concerning cultural representation, ownership, pricing, and benefit sharing (Liu & Kou, 2024).

Cultural entrepreneurs also face challenges involving limited finance, business skills, intellectual-property protection, market access, and unstable demand. They must balance commercial viability with cultural integrity because excessive standardisation or commercialisation may weaken the meanings that make cultural products distinctive (UNESCO, 2022).



Figure 127. Modern Cultural Entrepreneur
Source: rparobe via Getty Images

Digital technologies **(Figure 127)** provide new opportunities through e-commerce, social media, online exhibitions, digital storytelling, and direct communication with international consumers. However, they also increase competition, platform dependence, imitation, and the risk of simplifying cultural narratives for online audiences. Digital development should therefore combine technological capability with cultural knowledge, ethical storytelling, and appropriate protection of intellectual property (UNCTAD, 2024).



Figure 128. Digital Transformation in Cultural Entrepreneurship
Source: Prasongsin via Getty Images

Figure 128 illustrates how cultural entrepreneurship increasingly combines traditional craftsmanship with digital technology. By using livestreaming, social media, and online sales platforms, artisans can demonstrate production processes, explain the cultural meanings of their work, and communicate directly with wider audiences. This approach expands market access while transforming craft products into interactive cultural experiences. When supported by community participation, professional skills, appropriate financing, and responsible technology, it can generate economic opportunities while strengthening cultural resilience, local identity, and sustainable destination development.

Chapter 8
Strategic Management of Cultural Capital Tourism

8.1 Cultural Capital Tourism Management

Tourism development increasingly depends on knowledge, creativity, identity, and experience in addition to physical attractions and infrastructure. Cultural heritage, living traditions, local knowledge, and creative industries can differentiate destinations, stimulate innovation, and support local development when they are integrated into tourism planning (OECD, 2022; Richards, 2021).

Culture should therefore be understood not merely as an attraction but as a strategic form of capital capable of generating cultural, social, economic, environmental, and symbolic value. However, these benefits do not arise automatically. They depend on effective preservation, community participation, interpretation, entrepreneurship, governance, and fair distribution of tourism benefits (UNESCO, 2022).

This book proposes *Cultural Capital Tourism Management (CCTM)* as an integrated framework for managing the relationship between culture and tourism. CCTM refers to the strategic process through which cultural resources are identified, preserved, activated, transformed into meaningful tourism experiences, and sustained for future generations.

The framework connects heritage, gastronomy, wellness traditions, creative industries, community knowledge, cultural

entrepreneurship, and soft power. It treats culture as a living and evolving resource rather than a static commodity. Through appropriate management, cultural capital can strengthen destination distinctiveness, community resilience, cultural continuity, and sustainable tourism competitiveness (OECD, 2022; UN Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024).

8.1.1 The Evolution of Tourism Resource Management

Tourism resource management has evolved from a primary focus on tangible assets—such as natural attractions, monuments, transport, and accommodation—toward a more integrated understanding of destination resources. Although physical infrastructure remains essential, it is increasingly complemented by cultural identity, creativity, local knowledge, authenticity, reputation, and community capabilities (OECD, 2022; Simarmata et al., 2024).

The resource-based view suggests that sustainable competitive advantage depends on resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and difficult to substitute (Barney, 1991). Cultural capital often possesses these characteristics because it is embedded in place-specific histories, beliefs, traditions, skills, and social relationships. Its tourism value, however, depends on effective preservation, interpretation, coordination, and community participation.

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai illustrates how a tourism resource derives value not only from its architecture

and location but also from its religious significance, cultural narratives, rituals, and relationship with local identity **(Figure 129)**. These intangible dimensions make the site more distinctive and meaningful than its physical characteristics alone.



Figure 129. Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai
Source: rainforestcruises.com

The growth of experiential tourism further reinforces the importance of cultural resources. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek learning, authenticity, creative participation, and meaningful interaction with local communities. Tourism management must therefore move beyond simply possessing attractions toward integrating tangible resources with cultural knowledge, experience design, creative industries, and local participation (OECD, 2022; Richards, 2021).

This evolution represents a shift from resource exploitation to strategic resource stewardship. Destinations can achieve stronger and more sustainable differentiation when cultural capital is protected and transformed into meaningful experiences that create value for both visitors and host communities.

8.1.2 Defining Cultural Capital Tourism Management

Cultural Capital Tourism Management (CCTM) draws upon cultural capital theory, cultural economics, sustainable tourism, destination governance, the creative economy, and community development. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualised cultural capital as knowledge, competencies, cultural objects, and institutional recognition, while Throsby (2020) emphasised that cultural capital can generate both cultural and economic value.

In this book, *CCTM is defined as the strategic and participatory process through which cultural resources are identified, preserved, activated, interpreted, and sustained to generate economic, social, cultural, environmental, and symbolic benefits for destinations and communities.* It recognises culture as both a productive asset and an irreplaceable inheritance that requires continued protection and reinvestment.

Cultural capital may include monuments, cultural landscapes, living traditions, local knowledge, gastronomy, wellness practices, crafts, performing arts, community identities, creative expressions, and cultural industries. Together, these

tangible and intangible resources constitute a destination's cultural asset base and contribute to its distinctiveness.

CCTM extends beyond conservation or tourism promotion. It integrates cultural mapping, safeguarding, experience design, entrepreneurship, interpretation, marketing, stakeholder coordination, capacity building, and benefit sharing. International policy research similarly emphasises that stronger connections between tourism and cultural and creative sectors require coordinated governance, community participation, and policies that balance economic opportunities with cultural integrity (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

Accordingly, successful CCTM does not simply convert culture into tourism products. It ensures that tourism value supports cultural continuity, community well-being, creative development, and the long-term renewal of the cultural resources upon which destination competitiveness depends (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025; UN Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024).

8.1.3 Core Components of Cultural Capital Tourism Management

The Cultural Capital Tourism Management framework consists of five interconnected components: *cultural capital identification, cultural capital preservation, cultural capital activation, cultural capital value creation, and cultural capital sustainability*. Together, these components explain how cultural resources can be transformed into tourism value without weakening their cultural significance or long-term continuity (OECD, 2022; Throsby, 2020).

As shown in **Figure 130**, CCTM operates as a continuous cycle centred on a destination's cultural resources. Cultural assets are first identified and preserved before being activated through appropriate tourism experiences. Activation creates economic, social, cultural, educational, and symbolic value, while sustainability and reinvestment maintain the resources and support the next management cycle.

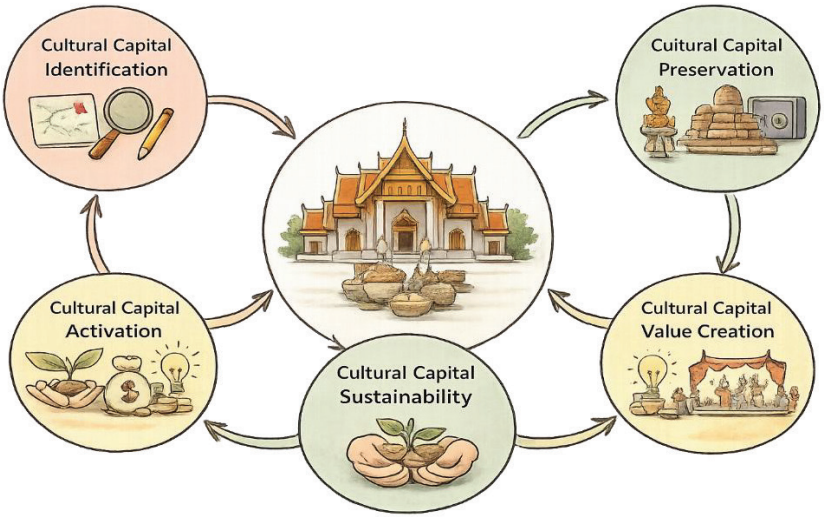


Figure 130. Core Components of CCTM
Source: Conceptualized by the authors with visual assistance from OpenAI.

Cultural capital identification involves documenting and mapping tangible heritage, living traditions, cultural landscapes, local knowledge, creative practices, and community identities. Community participation is essential because cultural custodians can identify meanings and resources that may be overlooked by external planners (UNESCO, 2024).

Cultural capital preservation protects the authenticity, integrity, knowledge, and cultural meanings associated with these resources. Preservation does not require culture to remain unchanged; rather, it supports cultural continuity while permitting community-led adaptation and innovation

(International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS], 2022).

Cultural capital activation integrates appropriate cultural resources into tourism experiences, interpretation, storytelling, festivals, gastronomy, wellness, creative activities, and community-based tourism. Activation should involve cultural custodians and ensure that tourism presentation remains respectful and connected to local contexts (Liu & Kou, 2024).

Cultural capital value creation produces multiple benefits, including income, employment, cultural transmission, community pride, destination identity, learning, and soft power. Effective management should ensure that communities participate in decision-making and receive a fair share of the benefits generated from their cultural resources (ICOMOS, 2022; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

Finally, cultural capital sustainability involves monitoring tourism impacts, maintaining cultural knowledge, strengthening local capabilities, and reinvesting tourism revenue in conservation, education, community development, and innovation. This component closes the cycle by ensuring that cultural capital remains meaningful and productive for future generations.

8.2 Destination Governance

Destination governance refers to the structures and processes through which public agencies, tourism businesses, communities, civil society, and cultural custodians coordinate decisions and responsibilities. It extends beyond government administration by emphasising stakeholder participation, collaboration, accountability, and shared management of destination resources (Panagiotopoulou & Skoultsos, 2025).

Effective governance is particularly important for destinations based on cultural capital because cultural resources may involve different forms of ownership, authority, and cultural meaning. Governance mechanisms should therefore coordinate tourism development with heritage protection, community well-being, infrastructure, visitor management, and equitable benefit distribution.

Thailand's 2026 tourism strategy illustrates this integrated approach by prioritising experiential and wellness tourism, high-value markets, infrastructure improvement, accessibility, workforce development, and tourist safety **(Figure 131)**. The strategy reflects a shift from growth based primarily on visitor numbers towards tourism that emphasises experience quality, sustainability, and long-term destination value (Government Public Relations Department, 2026).



Figure 131. Thailand 2026 Tourism Strategy
Source: PR Thai Government via Facebook.com

Infrastructure governance includes improving signage, public restrooms, accessibility, transport connections, and service standards. These facilities shape the entire visitor journey and influence destination quality, inclusion, and competitiveness. Thailand's current policy also emphasises personnel development so that visitors receive professional and consistent services across tourism destinations (Government Public Relations Department, 2026).

Tourist safety requires coordination among national agencies, local authorities, tourism businesses, communities, public-health organisations, and emergency services. Thailand's governance structure assigns responsibilities across the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the Department of Tourism, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration, and regional and local authorities. Current policy also emphasises digital information systems, international safety standards, carrying-capacity management, climate adaptation, and the decentralisation of tourism benefits (OECD, 2026).

Successful destination governance therefore integrates market development, cultural-resource protection, infrastructure, accessibility, workforce capability, safety, technology, environmental management, and stakeholder participation. Within the CCTM framework, governance provides the institutional foundation for balancing visitor experiences and economic value with cultural integrity, community interests, and long-term sustainability.

8.2.1 Understanding Destination Governance

Destination governance emerged from the recognition that tourism destinations are complex systems involving public agencies, tourism businesses, communities, civil society, and cultural custodians. Because no single organisation controls all destination activities, tourism development depends on coordination among stakeholders operating within shared geographical and institutional settings (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Panagiotopoulou & Skoultsos, 2025).

Governance refers to the processes through which collective decisions are formulated, implemented, monitored, and revised. It includes formal mechanisms, such as laws, regulations, policies, and public institutions, as well as informal mechanisms, including partnerships, networks, trust, negotiation, and shared social norms. Destination governance therefore extends beyond government control to encompass collaboration among actors with different responsibilities, resources, knowledge, and levels of influence.

Effective governance requires clear roles, stakeholder representation, transparent decision-making, accountability, information sharing, and mechanisms for resolving conflict. Recent research emphasises that multi-stakeholder approaches are most effective when they are adapted to local conditions and supported by continuing participation rather than occasional consultation (Panagiotopoulou & Skoultsos, 2025). Digital systems can further support coordination and data sharing, but they cannot replace institutional capacity, trust, or collaborative relationships (Çakar, 2023).

Governance becomes particularly complex in cultural tourism destinations because cultural resources may simultaneously hold economic, historical, social, symbolic, environmental, and spiritual value. Different stakeholders may also possess formal ownership, cultural authority, traditional knowledge, or rights connected with these resources. The ICOMOS International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism therefore emphasises participatory governance involving communities, rights-holders, and other stakeholders in heritage

and tourism management (International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS], 2022).

Within the framework, destination governance provides the institutional foundation for balancing cultural preservation, tourism development, visitor needs, community well-being, and equitable benefit sharing. It ensures that cultural capital is managed through collective responsibility rather than being controlled solely by tourism markets or government agencies.

8.2.2 Collaborative Governance and Tourism Development

Tourism scholars increasingly emphasise *collaborative governance* as an approach based on partnership, participation, and shared decision-making among stakeholders (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Panagiotopoulou & Skoultsos, 2025). This approach recognises that complex tourism challenges cannot be managed effectively through hierarchical control alone, especially in destinations where multiple actors influence planning, service delivery, heritage use, and visitor management.

Collaboration is particularly important in destinations that depend on cultural capital because cultural resources often cut across sectors and jurisdictions. A single destination may involve heritage agencies, tourism organisations, local governments, communities, entrepreneurs, educational institutions, and cultural practitioners. Since no single organisation can manage all these dimensions independently,

governance must rely on coordination, negotiation, and shared responsibility.

The collaborative governance model illustrated by the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) demonstrates how tourism development can be supported through stakeholder networks, coordination mechanisms, and joint planning processes **(Figure 132)**. Such arrangements enable stakeholders to share information, align objectives, reduce duplication, and improve the implementation of tourism policies and projects.



Figure 132. Tourism Collaborative Governance
Source: dasta.or.th

Collaborative governance can also improve decision quality and legitimacy because it brings together different forms of knowledge, including policy expertise, business experience, and local cultural knowledge. When stakeholders participate meaningfully, they are more likely to support implementation and less likely to resist tourism initiatives that affect their communities or cultural resources (Panagiotopoulou & Skoultsos, 2025).

These benefits are especially important in cultural tourism destinations, where governance must balance conservation, visitor experiences, local livelihoods, and cultural integrity. Collaborative governance therefore strengthens destination resilience by improving trust, collective problem-solving, and the ability to respond to change, conflict, and uncertainty. Within the framework, it provides an essential mechanism for ensuring that cultural capital is managed through inclusive and coordinated action rather than fragmented decision-making.

8.2.3 Destination Governance in Thailand

Thailand's destination governance **(Figure 133)** operates through national, regional, provincial, and local institutions. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports leads national policy, strategic planning, and inter-agency coordination. The Department of Tourism oversees standards and regulation, while the Tourism Authority of Thailand focuses primarily on marketing and promotion. Regional and local authorities manage infrastructure,

safety, community-based tourism, and destination-specific risks (OECD, 2026; TAT, 2026).

Cultural destinations require additional coordination with the Ministry of Culture, the Fine Arts Department, local administrative organisations, religious institutions, communities, and private enterprises. The Fine Arts Department is responsible for preserving, conserving, restoring, and promoting Thailand's arts and cultural heritage, while tourism agencies manage visitor access, services, and destination promotion. This division of responsibilities creates opportunities for specialised management but also requires clear coordination to prevent conflicting policies or inappropriate use of cultural resources (Fine Arts Department, 2026; Government Public Relations Department, 2026).



Figure 133. Destination Governance in Thailand
Source: PR Thai Government via Facebook.com

The Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) provides an important area-based governance mechanism. It works with local authorities and communities to develop tourism plans, strengthen local capabilities, create stakeholder networks, and distribute tourism benefits within designated areas. Such arrangements help connect national policy with local knowledge and community priorities.

Effective destination governance in Thailand therefore depends on cooperation across administrative levels and sectors. Community participation, transparent responsibilities, shared information, cultural protection, and equitable benefit distribution are essential for converting cultural capital into sustainable tourism value without weakening local identity or community control.

8.3 Stakeholder Management

Effective stakeholder management is essential to Cultural Capital Tourism Management because tourism destinations involve actors with different interests, responsibilities, resources, and levels of influence. Public agencies, businesses, communities, cultural institutions, educational organisations, civil society, and visitors collectively shape tourism outcomes. Their coordination can therefore determine whether tourism strengthens cultural preservation, destination competitiveness, and community well-being.

Stakeholder management refers to the systematic process of identifying stakeholders, understanding their interests and influence, facilitating participation, coordinating responsibilities, and managing potential conflicts. It recognises that sustainable value is created through relationships among stakeholders rather than through the actions of a single organisation (Freeman et al., 2020). In tourism, meaningful engagement can improve decision quality, legitimacy, trust, and implementation effectiveness (Panagiotopoulou & Skoultsos, 2025).

The TAT Stakeholder Management Day 2025 illustrates Thailand's efforts to promote stakeholder-driven tourism governance **(Figure 134)**. The event brought together representatives from more than 104 public- and private-sector organisations to exchange perspectives and strengthen cooperation. Discussions focused on smart data, cross-sector collaboration, digital technology, sustainability, and the development of a smart, sustainable, and seamless tourism system (TAT, 2025).



Figure 134. TAT Stakeholder Management Day 2025
Source: ride-explorer.com

Local communities are particularly important stakeholders because they often maintain cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, community identities, and living cultural practices. Government agencies provide policy, regulation, infrastructure, and financial support, while businesses transform cultural resources into tourism products and services. Cultural institutions, universities, and civil-society organisations contribute expertise in preservation, interpretation, research, and capacity building.

Stakeholder interests may nevertheless conflict. Tourism growth can create tensions involving heritage conservation, cultural authenticity, land and resource use, visitor pressure, and benefit distribution. Effective management therefore requires

transparent communication, inclusive participation, negotiation, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and clear accountability. Recent research emphasises that stakeholder frameworks should be adapted to destination conditions and involve communities continuously rather than through occasional consultation (Panagiotopoulou & Skoultsos, 2025).

Within the framework, stakeholder management connects cultural preservation with tourism development. It helps ensure that cultural resources are interpreted responsibly, benefits are distributed fairly, and cultural custodians retain meaningful influence over decisions. Destinations that manage stakeholder relationships effectively are better positioned to support innovation, cultural continuity, community resilience, and sustainable tourism development.

8.4 Cultural Resource Planning

Cultural resource planning is the systematic process of identifying, assessing, protecting, activating, and monitoring cultural assets for responsible tourism development. It seeks to generate economic and social benefits without weakening cultural significance, authenticity, or long-term continuity.

Cultural resources extend beyond monuments and historic buildings. They include cultural landscapes, living traditions, local knowledge, craftsmanship, performing arts, gastronomy, festivals, languages, beliefs, and community identities. Together, these tangible and intangible resources

provide destinations with distinctive tourism experiences that are closely connected to local people and places.

Planning begins with cultural inventories and mapping. These processes document the location, condition, significance, ownership, cultural meanings, and vulnerability of resources. Research in Takua Pa Old Town, Thailand, demonstrates how GIS mapping, field surveys, and interviews with local stakeholders can identify heritage clusters, conservation priorities, and opportunities for sustainable tourism development (O-in, 2025).

Planning must also evaluate whether cultural resources are suitable for tourism use. Assessments should consider cultural significance, physical condition, community acceptance, visitor demand, accessibility, and potential impacts. For fragile sites and living traditions, management plans should incorporate monitoring, carrying-capacity indicators, visitor zoning, timed access, or limits of acceptable change (ICOMOS, 2022).

Community participation is fundamental because residents and cultural custodians possess knowledge about the meanings, histories, and appropriate uses of local resources, as illustrated by agricultural community participation in tourism planning **(Figure 135)**. Their involvement improves the quality and legitimacy of decisions while strengthening ownership, cultural transmission, and support for tourism development. UNESCO similarly emphasises community-based inventorying as a process through which communities identify and document their own living heritage (UNESCO, 2024).



Figure 135. Agricultural Community Participation
Source: thailandvillageacademy.com

Contemporary cultural resource planning should be integrated and adaptive. Cultural resources must be considered alongside land use, infrastructure, environmental conditions, community livelihoods, visitor management, and local economic development. Plans should also be reviewed as cultural practices, tourism demand, technology, and environmental risks change.

In Thailand, this approach is relevant to heritage cities, creative districts, community-based tourism destinations, gastronomy routes, wellness areas, and cultural festivals. Effective planning can transform underused cultural assets into meaningful tourism experiences while protecting cultural identity, supporting community benefits, and maintaining resources for future generations.

8.5 Experience Design

Experience design transforms cultural resources into meaningful and memorable tourism encounters. It involves the deliberate arrangement of activities, interpretation, settings, sensory elements, and host–visitor interactions to encourage learning, participation, immersion, and emotional engagement. This approach reflects the experience economy, in which value is created through active involvement rather than passive consumption (Pine & Gilmore, 2019).

Effective cultural experience design combines authenticity, education, storytelling, interaction, novelty, and co-creation. Research identifies these elements as important dimensions of participatory tourism experiences, while historical storytelling can strengthen visitors' perceptions of authenticity and their involvement in value creation (Deng et al., 2024; Leong et al., 2024).

The community activity shown in Figure 136 illustrates how traditional costumes, dance, music, spatial atmosphere, and direct interaction can transform local culture into a multisensory tourism experience. Rather than positioning visitors as passive spectators, the activity enables them to observe, participate, and build meaningful connections with community members **(Figure 136)**.



Figure 136. Cultural Community Participation
Source: thailandvillageacademy.com

Evidence from creative cultural tourism in Thailand indicates that cultural immersion and personal expression can enhance enjoyment, cultural empathy, and attachment to a destination (Chiengkul & Kumjorn, 2026). Cultural experience design should therefore communicate local meanings rather than merely provide entertainment.

Community members and cultural custodians should participate in determining what is presented, how visitors engage, and how benefits are distributed. Within the CCTM framework, experience design connects cultural preservation with activation and value creation by producing high-quality experiences that support cultural continuity, visitor satisfaction, and community well-being.

8.6 Storytelling and Interpretation

Cultural resources acquire meaning through the stories associated with them. Heritage sites, traditions, festivals, culinary practices, and cultural landscapes become valuable tourism assets not only because of their physical or aesthetic characteristics but also because of the narratives that communicate their origins, significance, and cultural meanings. Storytelling and interpretation therefore play essential roles in Cultural Capital Tourism Management by transforming cultural resources into meaningful, engaging, and educational visitor experiences (Doyle & Kelliher, 2023; Nowacki, 2021).

Heritage interpretation refers to the purposeful communication of the significance and values of natural and cultural resources to visitors. Effective interpretation extends beyond the presentation of historical facts by connecting cultural knowledge with visitors' existing experiences, emotions, and interests. Storytelling is particularly valuable within this process because narratives can make complex cultural meanings more accessible, memorable, and personally relevant. Research indicates that well-designed heritage stories can stimulate imagination, emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, and personal meaning, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the visitor experience (Campos et al., 2025; Leong et al., 2024).



Figure 137. Thailand Co-Creator Campaign
Source: thailand.go.th

In tourism, storytelling can communicate community histories, local identities, traditional knowledge, cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and significant historical events. Through these narratives, visitors are encouraged to move beyond passive observation and participate in the interpretation and co-creation of tourism experiences. Storytelling can consequently strengthen visitors' emotional connections with destinations, improve perceived value and satisfaction, and contribute to memorable experiences and revisit intentions (Doyle & Kelliher, 2023; Feng et al., 2024).

The Thailand Co-Creator programme shown in **Figure 137** illustrates how coordinated storytelling and interpretation can translate national tourism policy into relatable visitor narratives. Developed by the Tourism Authority of Thailand under the concept *Healing is the New Luxury*, the programme

collaborates with Thai and international creators to communicate Thailand through five interconnected dimensions: Retreats, Rituals, Reels, Rhythms, and Relations. These dimensions represent different ways in which contemporary travellers experience destinations through natural settings, cultural practices, storytelling, local lifestyles, and human relationships (TAT, 2026).

The programme presents five curated routes covering Kanchanaburi, Chiang Mai–Lampang, Sakon Nakhon–Nakhon Phanom, Khao Sok in Surat Thani, and Songkhla. Each route communicates distinctive narratives concerning nature, spirituality, community life, cultural continuity, cuisine, and local hospitality. Participating creators share first-hand experiences through digital and social-media platforms, acting as contemporary cultural interpreters who transform places and traditions into accessible stories for international audiences. This approach reflects the growing importance of digital storytelling in communicating cultural heritage while encouraging audience engagement across contemporary media platforms (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; TAT, 2026).

For destinations rich in cultural capital, storytelling can also strengthen authenticity and differentiation. Each destination possesses distinctive narratives shaped by its history, environment, beliefs, people, and cultural development. When these narratives are interpreted accurately and with the participation of local communities, they can distinguish destinations within competitive tourism markets while reinforcing cultural identity and encouraging respect for heritage.

Storytelling should therefore be treated not merely as a promotional technique but as a strategic management process that connects cultural preservation, visitor experience, community representation, and destination positioning (Leong et al., 2024; Nowacki, 2021).

8.7 Destination Branding

In an increasingly competitive global tourism market, destinations must establish distinctive identities that differentiate them from competitors and create meaningful associations among potential visitors. Destination branding provides a strategic framework for defining and communicating the characteristics, values, narratives, and experiences that make a place distinctive. For destinations rich in cultural resources, tangible and intangible cultural capital can provide the symbols, traditions, stories, and lifestyles that underpin brand identity and market positioning (Aman et al., 2024; Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024).

Destination branding may be understood as the strategic process through which a destination develops, communicates, and manages a distinctive identity to influence how it is perceived by target audiences. Destination brand identity represents how a destination seeks to present itself, whereas destination image reflects how visitors and other audiences actually perceive it. Effective branding therefore extends beyond promotional slogans, logos, and visual symbols; it encompasses the collective identity, reputation, values, and experience proposition of a place. Its development requires consistency

between the destination's cultural characteristics, stakeholder aspirations, marketing communication, and the experiences delivered to visitors (Aman et al., 2024; Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024).



Figure 138. China International Travel Mart 2025
Source: matichon.co.th

Thailand's participation as the Guest Country of Honour at the China International Travel Mart 2025, held in Haikou from 19 to 21 December 2025, demonstrates the strategic use of international events to strengthen destination branding in the Chinese market, as illustrated in **Figure 138**. Under the brand message *Amazing Thailand, the Joy Never Ends*, the Thailand Pavilion combined business and consumer marketing with

experiential presentations of Thai culture. These included traditional massage, handicraft workshops, Khon performances, regional dances, Muay Thai, Thai national costumes, and contemporary fashion. Organised during the 50th anniversary of Thailand–China diplomatic relations, the initiative also reinforced bilateral ties through the concept that "China and Thailand are one family" (Matichon Online, 2026; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2025).

The Thailand Pavilion in **Figure 138** further demonstrates how cultural capital can be activated as a destination-branding resource. Rather than communicating Thailand solely through conventional advertising, the pavilion enabled audiences to encounter Thai hospitality, performing arts, craftsmanship, wellness traditions, fashion, and contemporary creativity. The integration of these cultural elements helped present Thailand as both culturally authentic and relevant to contemporary travellers. Such experiential branding can strengthen destination awareness while connecting tourism promotion with cultural diplomacy, creative industries, and national soft-power objectives.

Thailand's broader destination identity is similarly associated with hospitality, cuisine, wellness traditions, cultural heritage, festivals, natural landscapes, and distinctive ways of life. These resources contribute not only to tourism marketing but also to the country's international reputation. Nevertheless, cultural assets must be represented carefully and inclusively. Destination branding should reflect the identities and aspirations of local communities rather than simplifying cultural diversity

into stereotypical images created exclusively for commercial promotion.

Successful destination branding consequently requires more than communication and market visibility. Brand credibility depends on whether the destination can deliver authentic, high-quality, and responsible experiences consistent with the promises communicated to visitors. Transparent communication, stakeholder collaboration, cultural preservation, sustainable infrastructure, and effective destination governance are therefore essential components of long-term brand development (Chen et al., 2025). When brand identity, cultural-resource management, and visitor experience are aligned, cultural capital can become a powerful source of competitive advantage, visitor loyalty, and destination resilience (Aman et al., 2024).

Chapter 9
Sustainability, Technology, and Future Challenges

9.1 Sustainable Tourism Development

Sustainable tourism development has become a central paradigm in contemporary tourism policy and destination management. Growing concerns regarding climate change, environmental degradation, cultural commodification, social inequality, overtourism, and resource depletion have intensified the need to reconsider how tourism is planned, developed, and evaluated. Sustainable tourism seeks to balance tourism's present and future economic, social, and environmental impacts while addressing the needs of visitors, tourism businesses, host communities, and the natural and cultural environments upon which tourism depends (UN Tourism, 2024).

Figure 139 illustrates the triple bottom line of sustainability through three interdependent dimensions: People, Planet, and Profit. People represents social well-being, equity, health, education, community participation, and quality of life. Planet concerns environmental protection, biodiversity conservation, responsible resource use, and ecological integrity. Profit represents economic viability, employment, business continuity, and the equitable distribution of tourism benefits. At the destination level, profit should therefore be understood more broadly as economic prosperity rather than short-term corporate gain. The intersections shown in **Figure 139** indicate that development must be socially and environmentally bearable,

socially and economically equitable, and environmentally and economically viable. Sustainability is achieved only when these dimensions are addressed together rather than pursued independently (Elkington, 1997).



Figure 139. Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability
Source: planeterra.org

Although the triple bottom line provides a useful conceptual foundation, contemporary sustainable tourism frameworks adopt a broader perspective. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council identifies four interconnected areas of destination sustainability: effective management, socio-economic sustainability, cultural sustainability, and environmental sustainability. This approach recognizes that good governance, stakeholder participation, monitoring, cultural protection, and the management of visitor pressures are necessary to translate sustainability principles into practical destination outcomes (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019).

Sustainability is especially important in cultural tourism because cultural resources are often unique, irreplaceable, and vulnerable to degradation. Historic buildings, cultural landscapes, traditional knowledge, community identities, languages, rituals, and artistic practices cannot easily be recreated once they have been lost or substantially altered. Tourism development that prioritizes short-term financial returns may contribute to cultural commodification, displacement, loss of community access, or the erosion of cultural meaning. Sustainable cultural tourism must therefore support conservation, respectful interpretation, community participation, and the transmission of cultural knowledge between generations (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, 2019; Hassan et al., 2024).

Contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize value creation rather than tourism growth alone. Destination success should not be evaluated exclusively through visitor arrivals,

occupancy rates, or tourism expenditure. Assessment should also consider residents' quality of life, decent employment, community participation, cultural vitality, environmental quality, visitor satisfaction, resource efficiency, and the distribution of tourism benefits. The adoption of the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism in 2024 represents an important international effort to integrate tourism's economic, social, and environmental effects into policy and destination measurement. Nevertheless, scholars continue to emphasize the need for stronger attention to resident well-being and other outcomes that extend beyond conventional economic indicators (Dwyer, 2024; UN Tourism, 2024).

For Thailand, sustainable tourism has become an increasingly important strategic priority. The Tourism Authority of Thailand has adopted value-based tourism for sustainability as a strategic objective, reflecting a shift from maximizing visitor numbers toward generating higher-quality experiences and broader benefits for destinations. In 2025, TAT and 20 public-, private-, and civil-society organizations also committed to advancing Thailand's Sustainable Tourism Goals toward 2030. The initiative promotes emissions reduction, resource efficiency, biodiversity protection, social equity, local participation, improved management standards, and sound governance (TAT, 2025; TAT, 2025).

Community-based tourism, creative tourism, wellness tourism, and cultural tourism provide important pathways through which Thailand can pursue this transition. When locally governed and responsibly managed, these forms of tourism can

generate employment and entrepreneurial opportunities while strengthening community participation, cultural continuity, environmental stewardship, and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025). Future tourism development will consequently depend upon the ability of Thai destinations to create meaningful economic value while protecting natural environments, sustaining cultural resources, enhancing community well-being, and preserving the identities that form the foundation of distinctive tourism experiences.

9.2 Cultural Sustainability

As tourism increasingly draws upon culture as a source of destination attractiveness and competitive advantage, cultural sustainability has become a central concern for researchers, policymakers, and destination managers. Although sustainable tourism was initially framed primarily through environmental, economic, and social dimensions, culture is now increasingly recognised as an essential dimension of sustainable development. The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration identifies culture as a global public good and emphasises its contribution to resilience, social inclusion, cohesion, creativity, and human-centred development (UNESCO, 2022). Cultural sustainability may therefore be understood as the capacity of communities and societies to maintain, transmit, adapt, and revitalize their cultural values, identities, knowledge systems, creative expressions, and heritage across generations while responding to changing social, economic, environmental, and technological conditions (Ottaviani et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

Cultural sustainability is particularly important in tourism because cultural resources contribute directly to destination identity and distinctiveness. Unlike physical infrastructure, cultural capital is embedded in collective memory, social relationships, local knowledge, community practices, and ways of life. The disappearance of traditional knowledge, artistic expressions, languages, rituals, or community identities may therefore weaken both the cultural vitality of a community and the qualities that distinguish a destination within the tourism market. Cultural sustainability is consequently not only a cultural objective but also a strategic requirement for maintaining meaningful tourism experiences and long-term destination competitiveness.

The concept extends beyond the physical conservation of monuments, historic buildings, or archaeological sites. It encompasses both tangible and intangible heritage and seeks to ensure that cultural practices remain meaningful and relevant within contemporary society. Living heritage should not be regarded as a static inheritance that must remain unchanged. Instead, it is continuously recreated and transmitted as communities respond to their environment, history, social relationships, and changing circumstances. Cultural sustainability therefore involves maintaining continuity while allowing communities to interpret, adapt, and creatively develop their cultural practices.

A central challenge is balancing cultural preservation with adaptation and innovation. Culture is inherently dynamic, and attempts to preserve traditions in fixed or idealised forms

may separate them from the communities and social contexts that give them meaning. Conversely, uncontrolled commercialization may simplify, standardize, or transform cultural practices primarily to satisfy market expectations. Research on tourism commodification demonstrates that commercial pressures can affect not only visible cultural products and performances but also behavioural patterns, social norms, values, and underlying cultural meanings (Bai & Weng, 2023). Sustainable cultural development must therefore protect cultural integrity without preventing communities from adapting their traditions, developing creative expressions, or responding to contemporary opportunities.

Tourism can contribute positively to cultural sustainability when it creates incentives for safeguarding heritage and provides resources for cultural transmission. Tourism revenue may support conservation activities, cultural education, festivals, artisan livelihoods, traditional skills, community enterprises, and the maintenance of cultural spaces. Cultural tourism may also strengthen awareness and appreciation of local traditions among visitors and residents. As illustrated in **Figure 140**, community-based tourism activities can create opportunities for visitors to learn directly from local people while enabling communities to retain ownership of their knowledge, practices, and cultural narratives. Participatory planning is especially important because cultural, social, environmental, and economic objectives must be considered together throughout the tourism-development process (Ottaviani et al., 2023).



Figure 140. Community-based Tourism Activity
Source: Cullen via xyzasia.com

However, tourism may also generate significant risks for cultural sustainability. Popular cultural destinations can experience overtourism, cultural commodification, displacement, unequal benefit distribution, restrictions on community access, and loss of local control. Cultural practices may be shortened, rescheduled, modified, or performed primarily for visitors, potentially weakening their original social, spiritual, or communal functions. A systematic review by Brooks et al. (2023) found that heritage tourism can contribute to employment, cultural revitalization, and infrastructure development, but may also produce cultural erosion, community fragmentation, restricted access to land and resources, and declining community well-being. These findings demonstrate that tourism does not

automatically support cultural sustainability; its outcomes depend substantially on governance, community participation, benefit distribution, and local control over cultural resources.

The role of communities is therefore fundamental. Local people are not merely stakeholders or providers of tourism services but custodians, practitioners, and transmitters of cultural capital. Their knowledge, values, memories, skills, and everyday practices provide the foundation of many cultural tourism experiences. Sustainable cultural management consequently requires communities to participate meaningfully in identifying cultural resources, determining what may be shared with visitors, designing tourism experiences, interpreting heritage, distributing benefits, and evaluating tourism impacts. The community cultural workshop presented in **Figure 141** illustrates how participatory activities can facilitate knowledge exchange, cultural learning, intergenerational transmission, and the co-creation of culturally grounded tourism experiences.



Figure 141. Community Cultural workshop
Source: localalike.com

Community participation must extend beyond consultation or symbolic involvement. Communities should possess genuine influence over decisions that affect their heritage and cultural lives. Participatory tourism planning can strengthen local ownership, improve the legitimacy of management decisions, and reduce the risk that cultural resources will be interpreted or commercialized exclusively by external organizations (Ottaviani et al., 2023). UNESCO's sustainable tourism activities in Nan Old City similarly demonstrate the value of combining living heritage, community-based tourism, cultural inventorying, creative experience design, youth participation, and intergenerational dialogue in the development of inclusive tourism models (UNESCO, 2024).

For Thailand, cultural sustainability has become increasingly important as destinations seek to transform cultural resources into tourism and soft-power value while preserving cultural diversity and local identity. Traditional festivals, culinary heritage, wellness practices, performing arts, religious traditions, craft production, vernacular architecture, and community lifestyles represent valuable forms of cultural capital. Research in Northern Thailand indicates that clearly defined cultural identity and active local participation can support the development of sustainable cultural tourism products that reflect the distinctive characteristics of destinations (Kanoksilapatham et al., 2023). Similarly, research on a community-based tourism enterprise in Chai Nat Province found that local leadership, community engagement, ownership, and the preservation of cultural and historical resources were important drivers of long-term sustainability (Thananusak & Suriyankietkaew, 2023).

The challenge for Thailand is therefore not simply to preserve cultural resources but to ensure that they remain meaningful, socially relevant, economically viable, and controlled by the communities that sustain them. This requires support for cultural practitioners, local enterprises, youth participation, community-based interpretation, cultural education, intellectual-property protection, and the fair distribution of tourism benefits. Tourism products should reflect living cultures rather than reducing complex cultural identities to standardized performances or decorative representations.

Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved when the cultural resources upon which it depends are weakened, commercialized

beyond recognition, or disconnected from their communities of origin. By supporting cultural transmission, community leadership, adaptive innovation, inclusive governance, and responsible tourism development, destinations can ensure that cultural capital continues to generate cultural, social, experiential, and economic value for both present and future generations.

9.3 Smart Tourism

The digital transformation of tourism has contributed to the emergence of smart tourism as an important paradigm for destination management, tourism governance, and visitor-experience enhancement. Smart tourism involves the coordinated use of information and communication technologies, mobile connectivity, artificial intelligence, big-data analytics, cloud computing, the Internet of Things (IoT), and digital platforms to collect, exchange, process, and transform data into value for visitors, businesses, communities, and destination managers. Unlike conventional e-tourism, which primarily digitizes tourism information and transactions, smart tourism integrates digital systems with physical infrastructure, organizational networks, and real-time destination environments (Gretzel et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2024).

Smart tourism therefore extends beyond the provision of mobile applications, websites, or free internet access. A destination becomes genuinely smart when technologies, data, institutions, businesses, residents, and visitors are interconnected within a coordinated tourism ecosystem. This integration enables

destination managers to monitor changing conditions, support evidence-based decisions, allocate resources efficiently, improve mobility, communicate safety information, and respond more rapidly to visitor needs and operational challenges (Gretzel et al., 2015; El Archi et al., 2023).

Data-driven destination management is particularly valuable in areas experiencing congestion, seasonal concentration, environmental pressures, and high visitor volumes. Information obtained from sensors, mobile devices, digital transactions, transport systems, and online platforms can assist managers in understanding spatial and temporal patterns of visitor behaviour. When appropriately governed, these data can support visitor-flow management, demand forecasting, transportation planning, emergency communication, resource conservation, and the dispersal of tourists towards less crowded locations. Smart tourism may consequently contribute to sustainable development by improving resource efficiency and enabling destinations to respond proactively rather than only after problems have occurred (El Archi et al., 2023).

Smart technologies also create opportunities for the conservation and responsible use of cultural resources. Digital mapping, remote sensors, three-dimensional documentation, virtual reality, augmented reality, and digital-twin technologies can support the recording, monitoring, interpretation, and presentation of heritage sites and cultural landscapes. At visitor sites, interactive media and location-based interpretation can make cultural knowledge more accessible while reducing pressure on fragile objects or restricted areas. Research indicates

that well-designed smart technologies can also strengthen the attractiveness and differentiation of smaller heritage destinations by enriching how visitors understand and experience local heritage (Pinke-Sziva et al., 2024).

Visitor-experience enhancement represents another important dimension of smart tourism. Mobile applications, digital guides, multilingual interfaces, augmented-reality experiences, intelligent chatbots, and personalized recommendation systems can provide context-sensitive information before, during, and after a journey. By combining visitor preferences with real-time information concerning location, transportation, weather, accessibility, crowding, and available services, smart systems can deliver more relevant and convenient recommendations. The integration of generative artificial intelligence, natural-language processing, and IoT systems may further support personalized trip planning and make tourism information more accessible to travellers with different needs and abilities (Suanpang & Pothipassa, 2024).

Nevertheless, smart tourism should not be regarded as inherently sustainable or socially beneficial. Its effectiveness depends upon data quality, institutional capacity, stakeholder collaboration, technological interoperability, and the ability to convert information into appropriate management action. Extensive data collection also creates concerns regarding privacy, cybersecurity, surveillance, commercial control over information, algorithmic bias, and unequal access to digital services. Destinations must therefore adopt transparent data-governance procedures and maintain non-digital alternatives for

visitors and community members who lack access to smartphones, connectivity, or digital skills. Human-centred and inclusive governance is essential to ensure that technology serves destination needs rather than becoming an objective in itself (Gretzel et al., 2015; Suanpang & Pothipassa, 2024).

For Thailand, the development of smart tourism can be observed through initiatives designed to improve information access, tourism safety, industry coordination, and visitor confidence. These initiatives demonstrate that smart tourism is relevant not only to tourist-facing applications but also to the governance and regulation of tourism businesses and professionals.



Figure 142. Thailand Smart Tourism Platform
Source: thai.tourismthailand.org

The Thailand Smart Tourism Platform presented in **Figure 142** was introduced in 2020 by the Tourism Authority of Thailand in collaboration with Beyond City Thailand Co., Ltd. The initiative was developed in response to changing travel

behaviour and the need to strengthen tourism safety and confidence during the COVID-19 period. Its initial phase involved the development of a smartphone-based Smart Map through which users could obtain current information concerning destinations, attractions, and tourism services. Government agencies, private organizations, and participating tourism businesses could also create and update dedicated micro-pages, allowing information to be contributed by multiple stakeholders (TAT, 2020).

Initially implemented in the Rattanakosin area, surrounding districts, and important locations along the Chao Phraya River, the platform illustrates how digital mapping and cross-sector information sharing can create more connected and informed tourism environments. The initiative also demonstrates an important characteristic of smart tourism: destination information is not managed by a single organization but is produced and updated through a network of public agencies, businesses, and tourism-service providers (TAT, 2020).



Figure 143. The Launch of Thailand Smart Tour (TST)
Source: thailand.go.th

A more recent example is the Thailand Smart Tour platform illustrated in **Figure 143**. Launched by Thailand's Department of Tourism in 2024, Thailand Smart Tour was designed to modernize tour-management processes and facilitate more efficient connections between licensed tour companies and registered tour guides. The platform enables tour-guide assignments and related operational procedures to be managed digitally, thereby improving the speed, traceability, and systematic organization of tourism services. The Department of Tourism required tour-guide assignment documents to be issued through the platform from 1 October 2024 (Government Public Relations Department, 2024).

The initiative demonstrates how smart tourism can contribute to governance as well as visitor experience. By connecting licensed tourism businesses with legally registered professionals, the platform aims to improve transparency, discourage illegal tourism operations, protect tourists' rights, and strengthen professional standards. Thailand Smart Tour therefore illustrates that smart tourism encompasses not only advanced visitor applications but also digital regulation, business coordination, accountability, and institutional efficiency (Government Public Relations Department, 2024).

Future smart-tourism development in Thailand should integrate visitor-facing services with destination-management systems, cultural-resource databases, transportation networks, environmental monitoring, and tourism-business regulation. Its success will depend not simply on adopting more technologies but on developing interoperable systems, reliable data, skilled personnel, inclusive access, strong privacy protection, and sustained collaboration among government agencies, local authorities, communities, technology providers, and tourism businesses. When these conditions are established, smart tourism can help Thailand balance visitor convenience and tourism competitiveness with cultural preservation, community well-being, safety, and long-term sustainability.

9.4 Artificial Intelligence in Tourism

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming tourism and hospitality by changing how destinations are managed, how tourism businesses operate, and how visitors

search for information, make decisions, and experience places. Technologies such as machine learning, natural language processing, predictive analytics, computer vision, recommendation systems, and generative AI allow tourism organizations to analyse large volumes of data, automate routine processes, and develop more responsive services. AI should therefore be understood not as a single technology but as a collection of computational methods capable of supporting prediction, communication, content generation, pattern recognition, and decision-making across the tourism system (Doborjeh et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2026).

At the operational level, AI can improve efficiency through demand forecasting, revenue management, dynamic pricing, automated customer service, workforce scheduling, and resource allocation. Machine-learning systems can identify patterns in historical and real-time data, enabling tourism businesses to anticipate changes in demand and make more informed operational decisions. Hotels, airlines, attractions, and destination-management organizations may also use AI to analyse customer feedback, identify service problems, predict maintenance requirements, and manage visitor flows more efficiently (Doborjeh et al., 2022).

At the visitor level, AI enables greater personalization throughout the travel journey. Intelligent travel assistants and generative AI platforms can recommend destinations, develop itineraries, translate information, compare services, and respond to visitor questions in real time. These systems can combine information about travellers' interests, budgets, accessibility

needs, previous behaviour, and current destination conditions to produce more relevant recommendations. However, the quality of these services depends heavily on the accuracy, representativeness, and currency of the information used by the AI system (Zhang et al., 2026).

AI also offers significant opportunities for cultural tourism and heritage management. Machine learning and computer vision can assist in documenting, classifying, monitoring, and digitally reconstructing cultural assets. AI-supported interpretation systems can provide multilingual information, personalized narratives, virtual guides, and adaptive learning experiences suited to visitors of different ages, interests, and abilities. When integrated with augmented reality, virtual reality, and digital heritage databases, AI can improve access to cultural knowledge and help visitors engage with heritage sites beyond the presentation of basic historical information (Sánchez-Martín et al., 2025).

Generative AI can additionally support cultural storytelling by producing text, images, audio, video, and interactive narratives. These capabilities may help local tourism businesses and communities communicate cultural traditions to wider audiences, particularly when they possess limited marketing resources. Nevertheless, AI-generated cultural content should be developed in collaboration with cultural practitioners and community members. Without appropriate local knowledge and verification, AI systems may generate inaccurate, simplified, stereotypical, or culturally inappropriate representations.

AI presents challenges concerning authenticity, trust, and transparency. Visitors may find AI-generated destination images and stories persuasive even when the content does not accurately represent the destination. Research on AI-generated tourism imagery demonstrates that perceived authenticity affects visitors' trust and their intentions to patronize destinations, while the labelling of AI-generated content can influence these perceptions (Bui et al., 2024). Tourism organizations should therefore clearly disclose the use of AI-generated promotional content and verify that images, narratives, and recommendations accurately represent actual places and experiences.

Other concerns include data privacy, algorithmic bias, intellectual-property rights, unequal technological access, misinformation, cybersecurity, and the displacement of human employment. These issues are especially significant in cultural tourism because AI models may underrepresent local languages, minority cultures, traditional knowledge, and community perspectives. UNESCO (2021) warns that AI may enrich cultural and creative industries but may also concentrate control over cultural content and weaken the diversity of languages and cultural expressions. Responsible AI adoption should consequently be guided by transparency, fairness, accountability, privacy protection, cultural diversity, and meaningful human oversight.

Cultural tourism remains inherently human and relational. Hospitality, interpretation, cultural exchange, emotional connection, and local knowledge cannot be fully reproduced through automated systems. AI should therefore complement rather than replace tour guides, cultural practitioners, community hosts, destination managers, and frontline service employees. Hybrid service models can allow AI to perform repetitive or information-intensive tasks while people provide empathy, contextual understanding, creativity, and culturally grounded interpretation.

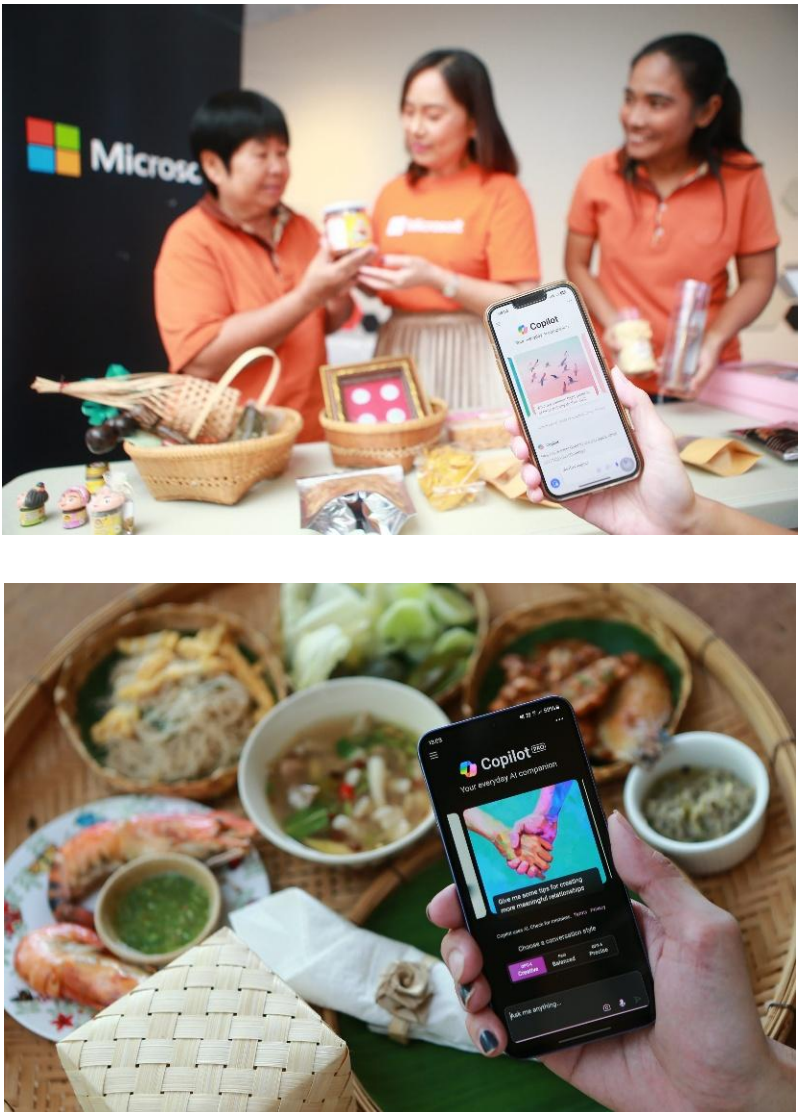


Figure 144. AI Skills for the AI-enabled Tourism Industry
Source: news.microsoft.com

The AI Skills for the AI-Enabled Tourism Industry programme presented in **Figure 144** illustrates how AI capacity building can support Thailand's tourism competitiveness and strengthen opportunities for local enterprises. Introduced by Microsoft Thailand in 2024, the programme was initially implemented among community enterprises and tourism entrepreneurs in U Thong District, Suphan Buri Province, in partnership with Kenan Foundation Asia and the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration. The training was designed to improve participants' ability to use digital and AI technologies in tourism-related business activities (Microsoft Thailand, 2024).

As shown in **Figure 144**, the programme introduced participants to Microsoft Copilot and other digital tools, including Microsoft Designer for visual-content development, Clipchamp for video production, and Sway for websites and marketing materials. Participants learned how these technologies could support promotional-content creation, communication with international visitors, the development of new tourism experiences, and the customization of marketing messages for different visitor groups. The programme aimed to extend learning opportunities to approximately 70,000 next-generation tourism entrepreneurs operating in secondary destinations across Thailand's five regions (Microsoft Thailand, 2024).

The initiative demonstrates that the value of AI in tourism does not depend solely on sophisticated destination systems or large corporations. AI tools can also improve the capabilities of community enterprises and small tourism businesses by reducing

barriers to content production, international communication, market access, and service innovation. When combined with local knowledge and community creativity, AI may help smaller destinations communicate their identities more effectively and develop tourism products that respond to changing visitor interests.

For destinations seeking to activate cultural capital, the principal challenge is to integrate AI innovation without weakening authenticity, community ownership, or cultural integrity. AI-generated content concerning local traditions, heritage, food, beliefs, and community identities should be reviewed by people who possess relevant cultural knowledge. Communities should also participate in decisions concerning which cultural information may be digitized, how it should be represented, and how any resulting economic benefits should be distributed.

Future tourism management will therefore involve hybrid approaches that combine technological capabilities with human expertise, ethical governance, and local knowledge. Destinations should invest not only in AI systems but also in AI literacy, data governance, workforce development, community participation, cybersecurity, and mechanisms for evaluating social and cultural impacts. When adopted responsibly, AI can enhance operational efficiency, visitor accessibility, cultural interpretation, creative storytelling, and destination competitiveness while ensuring that technology remains accountable to the people and cultures it is intended to serve.

9.5 Digital Cultural Experiences

Digital technologies are transforming the ways in which culture is preserved, interpreted, accessed, and experienced. Museums, heritage sites, cultural institutions, and tourism organizations increasingly employ digital platforms and immersive media to create new forms of cultural engagement that extend beyond physical visitation. As a result, digital cultural experiences have become an important component of contemporary tourism development and cultural management, enabling destinations to broaden access to heritage while enriching interpretation and audience participation (Bekele et al., 2018; Guttentag, 2010).

Digital cultural experiences encompass a wide range of applications, including virtual museums, online exhibitions, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), immersive storytelling, digital heritage archives, interactive interpretation systems, and virtual tourism environments. These technologies enable audiences to engage with cultural resources regardless of geographical location and provide new opportunities for education, accessibility, and cultural participation. In particular, AR and VR can make cultural content more interactive, vivid, and meaningful by helping users visualize historical settings, artefacts, and narratives in more engaging ways (Bekele et al., 2018; tom Dieck & Jung, 2017).



Figure 145. Digital Cultural Experience
Source: blog.gothru.co

As illustrated in **Figure 145**, digital technologies expand the ways in which cultural capital can be communicated and activated. Cultural resources that were once accessible primarily through on-site visitation can now reach broader national and international audiences through digital channels. This expanded accessibility supports cultural dissemination, destination visibility, and educational outreach, while also creating new opportunities for tourism promotion and soft power development (Guttentag, 2010; Tussyadiah et al., 2018).

Digital cultural experiences also contribute to heritage conservation. Virtual access, digital archives, and immersive interpretation can reduce pressure on fragile heritage sites while maintaining public engagement and awareness. This function became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many museums and cultural institutions accelerated digital

initiatives in order to remain accessible despite travel restrictions and site closures. These developments demonstrated the potential of digital technologies to enhance institutional resilience and sustain cultural participation during periods of disruption (Agostino et al., 2020).

At the same time, digitalization raises important questions concerning authenticity, interpretation, and cultural representation. Although digital experiences can complement and enrich physical visitation, they cannot fully replicate the sensory, emotional, and social dimensions of encountering culture in its original setting. The value of cultural experience often lies not only in information acquisition but also in place-based atmosphere, human interaction, and direct engagement with living cultural contexts. For this reason, digital cultural experiences should be understood as complementary rather than substitutive forms of access (Guttentag, 2010; Tussyadiah et al., 2018).

Effective cultural capital tourism management therefore requires a balanced approach. Destinations and cultural institutions should embrace digital innovation while ensuring that cultural content is interpreted accurately, presented responsibly, and aligned with the values and meanings attached to it. Digital tools are most effective when they enhance understanding, accessibility, and engagement without weakening the authenticity or significance of the cultural resources being represented (Bekele et al., 2018; tom Dieck & Jung, 2017).

Looking forward, the integration of digital technologies into cultural tourism is likely to intensify. Advances in immersive

media, artificial intelligence, digital storytelling, and interactive platforms will continue to reshape how cultural experiences are created and consumed. Destinations that successfully combine technological innovation with cultural authenticity will be better positioned to strengthen visitor engagement, support heritage preservation, and expand global access to cultural heritage in sustainable and meaningful ways.

Chapter 10
The Future of Cultural Capital and Soft Power Tourism

10.1 Global Tourism Megatrends

The global tourism industry is entering a period of profound structural transformation. The forces shaping tourism in the twenty-first century extend far beyond conventional concerns such as transportation, accommodation, and destination marketing. Technological innovation, demographic transition, climate change, sustainability imperatives, geopolitical uncertainty, workforce transformation, and changing consumer values are altering how tourism is planned, managed, and experienced. These long-term and interconnected changes, commonly described as megatrends, create both opportunities and risks for destinations worldwide. They also require tourism policy to become more anticipatory, coordinated, inclusive, and resilient (OECD, 2026; World Economic Forum, 2024).

For destinations that depend heavily on cultural resources, understanding these megatrends is particularly important. Cultural capital, including heritage, traditions, knowledge, creativity, gastronomy, lifestyles, and community identities, provides many of the distinctive qualities increasingly valued in tourism. Future destination competitiveness will therefore depend not only on physical infrastructure and market access but also on the capacity to preserve, interpret, adapt, and responsibly activate cultural resources under rapidly changing global conditions.

One influential megatrend is the continuing movement away from exclusively standardized tourism products toward more experiential, participatory, and meaningful forms of travel. Although mass tourism remains economically significant, many travellers increasingly seek opportunities to learn, create, interact with local people, pursue personal interests, and develop emotional connections with destinations. Tourism value is consequently created not only through the consumption of services but also through memorable intellectual, emotional, social, sensory, and potentially transformative experiences. This development reflects the broader experience economy, in which organizations compete for visitors' time, attention, participation, and emotional engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 2019).

This experiential orientation strengthens the importance of cultural capital. Cooking classes, craft workshops, cultural festivals, community-based tourism, creative activities, spiritual practices, and heritage interpretation allow visitors to participate in local culture rather than merely observe it. However, the growing demand for authentic experiences must be managed carefully. Experiences presented as authentic should remain connected to community meanings and local cultural contexts rather than being simplified exclusively for commercial consumption.

A second megatrend is the growing importance of wellness, preventive health, and quality of life. Population ageing, urban stress, greater health awareness, and changing lifestyles are increasing interest in travel that supports physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Wellness

tourism expenditures reached approximately US$894 billion worldwide in 2024, illustrating the segment's substantial recovery and growing role within the global tourism economy (Global Wellness Institute, 2025).

This trend encompasses destination spas, meditation retreats, nature-based activities, thermal tourism, forest bathing, sleep tourism, healthy gastronomy, longevity programmes, and other preventive or restorative experiences. Thailand is well positioned to respond because Thai massage, herbal knowledge, Buddhist practices, traditional healing, hospitality, cuisine, and holistic approaches to well-being already contribute to the country's tourism identity. Nevertheless, future competitiveness will require credible standards, qualified personnel, responsible cultural representation, scientific integrity, and clear distinctions between wellness services and regulated medical treatment.

Technological transformation represents another defining megatrend. Artificial intelligence, big-data analytics, mobile platforms, virtual and augmented reality, biometric systems, smart-destination technologies, and the Internet of Things increasingly influence every stage of the visitor journey. These technologies can improve forecasting, personalization, accessibility, safety communication, visitor-flow management, cultural interpretation, and operational efficiency. They can also help tourism organizations respond more effectively to changing demand and environmental conditions (OECD, 2026; World Economic Forum, 2024).

Digital transformation nevertheless introduces risks related to privacy, cybersecurity, algorithmic bias, misinformation, intellectual-property rights, digital inequality, and excessive dependence on technological platforms. Cultural destinations must also consider whether digitally generated representations accurately reflect local histories, identities, and values. Technology should therefore complement rather than replace human hospitality, local knowledge, cultural practitioners, and direct engagement with places and communities.

Sustainability and climate resilience constitute another dominant megatrend. Tourism destinations face growing exposure to extreme heat, flooding, drought, wildfires, coastal erosion, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and other climate-related disruptions. These pressures affect tourism infrastructure, seasonality, visitor safety, heritage conservation, and the livelihoods of host communities. At the same time, tourism contributes to environmental pressures through transportation emissions, resource consumption, waste generation, and intensive development. Current international policy increasingly emphasises the need to integrate climate-risk assessment, early-warning systems, resilient infrastructure, environmental management, and community well-being into tourism planning (OECD, 2026).

Sustainability is consequently shifting from a specialised tourism segment to a fundamental requirement for destination competitiveness and resilience. Destinations are increasingly expected to manage visitor pressure, reduce emissions and waste, protect biodiversity, support decent employment, improve accessibility, distribute tourism benefits more fairly, and measure outcomes beyond visitor arrivals. This transition requires stronger governance because individual tourism businesses cannot address climate change, congestion, infrastructure pressure, and community well-being independently.

Closely related to sustainability is the emergence of regenerative tourism. Sustainable tourism generally seeks to minimise negative impacts and maintain environmental, social, and cultural resources, whereas regenerative tourism aims to improve the social and ecological systems in which tourism operates. Regenerative approaches emphasise place-based development, ecosystem restoration, community empowerment, cultural revitalisation, local stewardship, and net-positive outcomes. They also recognise that destinations are living systems rather than products designed solely for visitor consumption (Bellato et al., 2024).

Regenerative tourism aligns closely with Cultural Capital Tourism Management because both approaches treat culture as a living resource that requires continued care, participation, transmission, and renewal. Tourism can contribute to regeneration when it strengthens local capabilities, restores cultural landscapes, supports traditional knowledge, revitalises community spaces, and enables residents to shape the direction

of development. Nevertheless, the term should not be used merely as a promotional label; regenerative claims should be supported by community-defined objectives and measurable social, cultural, and environmental outcomes.

Demographic transition represents another important megatrend. Population ageing is reshaping tourism demand in many societies and increasing the importance of accessibility, safety, comfort, wellness, cultural learning, and multigenerational travel. The United Nations identifies population ageing as one of the major demographic transformations affecting societies worldwide (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2024).

Destinations must consequently develop inclusive environments that accommodate different levels of mobility, sensory ability, digital literacy, and health-related needs. Accessible tourism should not be treated as a niche product but as a component of universal destination design. Cultural attractions, transportation systems, accommodation, information services, and digital platforms must become more usable by visitors of different ages and abilities.

At the same time, younger generations are influencing tourism through their use of digital media, search for identity-related experiences, and interest in creativity, diversity, and social and environmental issues. However, generational behaviour should not be oversimplified. Research concerning Generation Z identifies an important gap between stated support for sustainability and actual travel choices, which may still be influenced by price, convenience, social media, and frequent

travel practices (Seyfi et al., 2025). Destinations should therefore make responsible choices practical, affordable, transparent, and attractive rather than assuming that environmental attitudes will automatically produce sustainable behaviour.

Another significant megatrend is the growing convergence of tourism with the cultural and creative industries. Film, music, design, fashion, gastronomy, crafts, gaming, digital media, festivals, and creative entrepreneurship increasingly shape destination images and visitor experiences. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence are further transforming how creative content is produced, distributed, and monetised, while also raising concerns about market concentration, cultural diversity, intellectual property, and unequal access to technology (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2024).

This convergence creates opportunities for destinations to develop distinctive tourism products, support cultural entrepreneurs, and connect local creativity with international markets. Film locations, culinary districts, design festivals, music events, craft communities, and digital cultural experiences can broaden the tourism economy beyond conventional attractions. However, policies should ensure that creators and communities retain meaningful participation, recognition, ownership, and economic benefits.

The globalisation of culture and the strategic use of soft power constitute another major trend. Countries increasingly employ cultural heritage, cuisine, film, music, sport, wellness traditions, education, and creative industries to shape international perceptions and strengthen national influence. Soft power operates through attraction and identification rather than coercion, allowing cultural familiarity and admiration to support wider diplomatic and economic relationships (Nye, 2004). Tourism is an especially visible channel of soft power because visitors encounter a country's culture directly and may develop enduring perceptions based on their experiences.

For Thailand, these megatrends create substantial opportunities as well as important management challenges. The country's heritage, gastronomy, wellness traditions, festivals, performing arts, creative industries, natural environments, and community-based cultural resources provide a strong foundation for experience-led and value-based tourism. Thailand's 2026 tourism strategy reflects this transition through the principle "Value is the New Volume," emphasising quality, balance, sustainability, creative and thematic tourism, data-informed storytelling, local identity, and the distribution of visitor flows across regions and seasons (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2025).

Responding effectively will require more than promotional campaigns. Thailand will need adaptive governance, climate-resilient infrastructure, digital and AI capabilities, skilled tourism personnel, credible sustainability standards, accessible services, community participation, and continued investment in cultural transmission. Tourism policy must also ensure that the economic activation of cultural capital does not weaken local ownership, cultural meaning, or the environmental and social systems that sustain tourism.

Ultimately, the future of tourism will be shaped by the capacity of destinations to anticipate change while protecting the qualities that define them. Cultural capital will become increasingly important because it provides authenticity, distinctiveness, meaning, creativity, well-being, and human connection—qualities that cannot be reproduced through infrastructure or technology alone. Destinations that preserve cultural integrity while supporting innovation, inclusion, regeneration, and community leadership will be better positioned to remain competitive and resilient in a rapidly changing global tourism environment.

10.2 Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism has emerged as an important development in contemporary tourism theory and practice. Although sustainable tourism remains the dominant framework for responsible tourism development, increasing concerns regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, overtourism, social inequality, and cultural erosion have encouraged scholars and practitioners to explore more transformative approaches. Regenerative tourism moves beyond the objective of minimizing tourism's negative impacts by seeking to restore, revitalize, and enhance the social, cultural, ecological, and economic systems within which tourism operates (Bellato et al., 2023; Bellato & Pollock, 2025).

Regenerative tourism should not necessarily be regarded as a replacement for sustainable tourism. Instead, it extends sustainability by shifting attention from maintaining existing conditions to developing the capacity of places, communities, and ecosystems to flourish. Sustainable tourism generally focuses on balancing economic, environmental, and social objectives and reducing harm. Regenerative tourism goes further by asking how tourism can generate net-positive outcomes, repair damaged relationships, restore ecosystems, strengthen cultural vitality, and improve community well-being (Bellato et al., 2023).

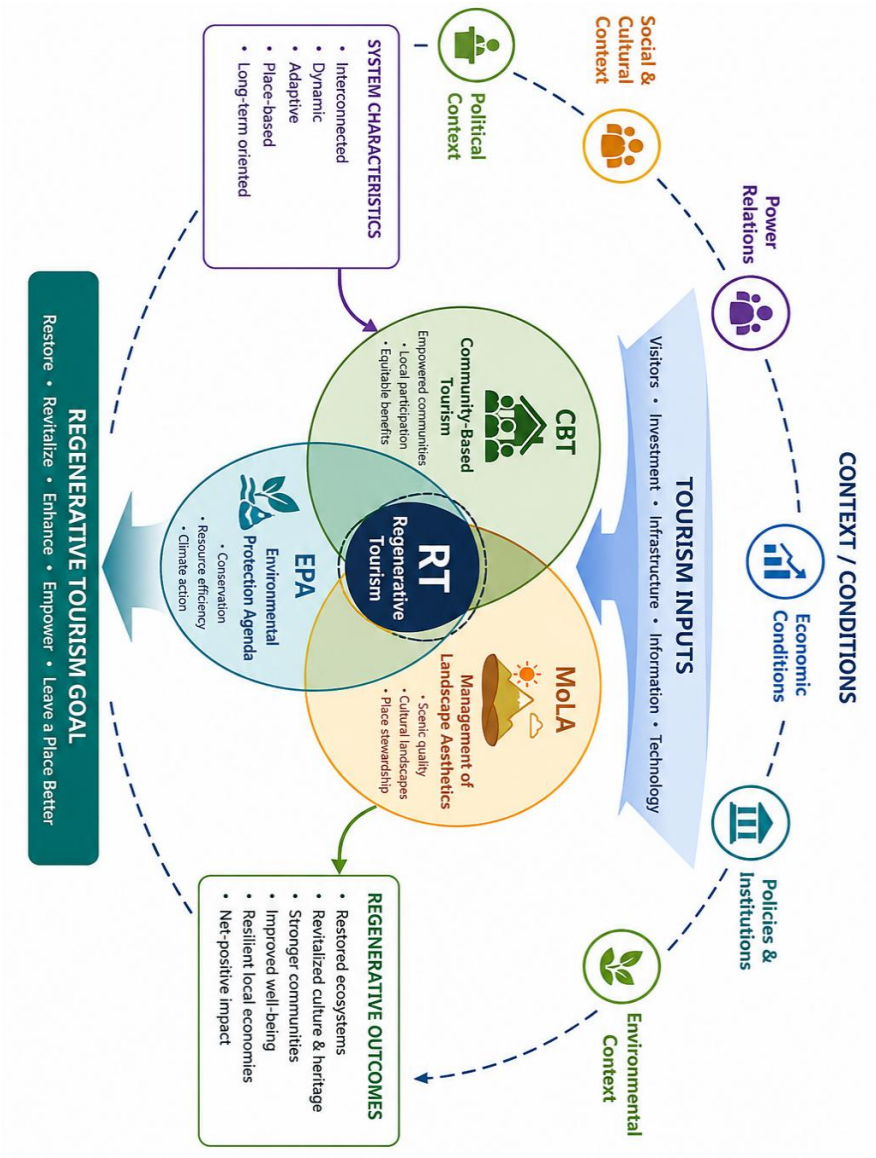


Figure 146. Regenerative Tourism Model

Source: Conceptualized by the authors based on Boustead (2020), with visual assistance from OpenAI.

Figure 146 presents tourism as a complex system shaped by economic, social, environmental, political, policy, and power-related conditions. Tourism inputs enter this system and interact with Community-Based Tourism (CBT), Management of Landscape Aesthetics (MoLA), and the Environmental Protection Agenda (EPA). Their central intersection produces Regenerative Tourism (RT), which aims not only to mitigate negative impacts but also to strengthen communities, improve landscapes, restore environmental quality, and create enduring social and economic benefits (Boustead, 2020).

The model reflects a central principle of regenerative tourism: tourism cannot be managed separately from the wider systems of which it forms a part. Destinations are interconnected social–ecological systems involving residents, visitors, businesses, cultural resources, institutions, infrastructure, landscapes, and natural ecosystems. A change in one component can affect the well-being and functioning of others. Regenerative tourism therefore applies systems thinking to understand relationships, feedback mechanisms, dependencies, and long-term consequences rather than treating individual tourism attractions or businesses in isolation (Bellato et al., 2023; Bellato & Pollock, 2025).

This systems perspective also challenges conventional growth-oriented measures of tourism success. Visitor arrivals, tourism receipts, occupancy rates, and investment remain economically relevant, but they do not fully indicate whether tourism improves a destination. Regenerative tourism places greater emphasis on outcomes such as ecological restoration,

cultural vitality, resident well-being, community capability, social cohesion, local ownership, and the equitable distribution of benefits. Tourism is consequently viewed as a means of supporting the long-term health of a place rather than as an end in itself.

A defining characteristic of regenerative tourism is its emphasis on place-based development. Standardized development models are often inappropriate because each destination possesses distinctive ecological conditions, cultural histories, knowledge systems, relationships, and community aspirations. Regenerative planning begins by identifying the unique potential of a place and asking what forms of tourism would contribute to its long-term well-being. Development priorities should therefore emerge from local conditions and community values rather than being determined solely by external market demand (Paddison & Hall, 2024; Pung et al., 2024).

This place-based orientation is particularly important for destinations rich in cultural capital. Cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, local creativity, community identity, and cultural landscapes are not static tourism assets. They are living resources that depend upon continuous practice, interpretation, transmission, and adaptation. Tourism can strengthen these resources by creating opportunities for cultural learning, community enterprise, and intergenerational exchange. Conversely, poorly managed tourism may weaken them through commodification, standardization, unequal control, or the loss of their original social meanings.



Figure 147. Traditional Cotton Spinning
Source: localalike.com

The traditional cotton-spinning activity presented in **Figure 147** illustrates how tourism can contribute to the continuation of cultural knowledge. When local practitioners demonstrate and teach traditional skills, tourism becomes a mechanism for transmitting knowledge rather than merely displaying finished cultural products. Such experiences can generate income for cultural practitioners, strengthen community pride, encourage younger generations to learn traditional skills, and help visitors appreciate the knowledge and labour embedded in local crafts.

Nevertheless, cultural activities should not be maintained exclusively for tourists. A regenerative approach ensures that cultural practices remain meaningful to the communities that sustain them. Communities should therefore decide which traditions may be shared, how they should be interpreted, and how tourism benefits should be distributed. This principle is especially important when tourism involves Indigenous knowledge, sacred practices, community histories, or culturally sensitive information.



Figure 148. Traditional Hand Weaving
Source: localalike.com

Traditional hand weaving in **Figure 148** further demonstrates the place-based character of regenerative tourism. Weaving techniques, materials, colours, motifs, and production methods are often connected to local environments, ethnic identities, family histories, and community knowledge. Supporting local weaving through tourism can sustain artisan livelihoods and cultural transmission while reinforcing the distinctive identity of a destination. However, regenerative outcomes require more than selling craft products. They depend on fair compensation, recognition of cultural ownership, access to local materials, skills development, and opportunities for artisans to participate in product design and tourism decision-making.

Regenerative tourism is therefore closely connected to cultural sustainability. Cultural capital can generate economic, social, symbolic, and experiential value, but it also requires continued reinvestment. Traditional knowledge must be transmitted to younger generations, cultural spaces must be maintained, heritage resources require conservation, and creative practitioners need opportunities to innovate. Without these processes, cultural resources may gradually decline even when tourism demand remains strong.

Tourism can support cultural regeneration by directing resources toward heritage conservation, cultural education, artisan development, language preservation, creative enterprises, and community-based cultural programmes. Visitor experiences can also be designed to encourage active learning, respectful participation, and meaningful exchange rather than passive

consumption. Creative tourism initiatives, for example, may strengthen local identity and cultural vitality by connecting visitors with community members through craft, gastronomy, music, storytelling, and other participatory activities (Duxbury et al., 2021).

Community participation is fundamental to this process. Local residents are not simply tourism stakeholders but co-owners, custodians, and creators of the places in which tourism occurs. Regenerative tourism requires communities to influence development objectives, determine acceptable forms of tourism, participate in interpretation, and share fairly in the benefits generated. Participation must therefore extend beyond consultation toward genuine decision-making authority, local ownership, and long-term collaboration.

Community-based tourism can provide an important foundation for regenerative development when it is locally governed and connected to community priorities. Rather than extracting economic and cultural value from communities, regenerative models retain value within destinations through local employment, community enterprises, cooperative management, and local supply chains. Research on community-based tourism enterprises in Thailand demonstrates that local leadership, community engagement, ownership, and the use of cultural and historical assets are important drivers of long-term sustainability (Thananusak & Suriyankietkaew, 2023).

For Thailand, regenerative tourism offers significant opportunities because the country's tourism economy is closely connected to cultural capital. Heritage resources, gastronomy,

wellness traditions, festivals, crafts, agricultural practices, performing arts, creative industries, and community knowledge provide a strong foundation for place-based tourism development. At the same time, many destinations face commercialization, environmental pressure, demographic change, unequal benefit distribution, and declining participation among younger generations.

Community-based cultural tourism represents one pathway through which regenerative principles may be implemented. Thai communities have developed tourism experiences based on agriculture, traditional livelihoods, crafts, cuisine, architecture, local history, and ecological knowledge. When these initiatives are community-led, tourism revenue can strengthen local enterprises, finance cultural activities, support environmental stewardship, and increase community pride. UNESCO's 2024 programme in Nan Old City, for example, integrated living heritage, creative tourism, community-based tourism, youth participation, cultural inventorying, and intergenerational learning to support more inclusive tourism development (UNESCO, 2024).

Creative tourism also offers regenerative potential. Participatory activities such as weaving, pottery, cooking, farming, music, dance, and storytelling can connect visitors with local knowledge while creating opportunities for cultural practitioners. Research at the Ban Chiang World Heritage Site indicates that creative tourism can help communities activate different forms of local capital, revitalize heritage, and support sustainable socio-economic development when community

participation is embedded in the tourism model (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

Wellness tourism provides another potential pathway. Traditional Thai massage, herbal knowledge, Buddhist mindfulness, local healing practices, and nature-based well-being experiences represent valuable forms of cultural capital. A regenerative approach would support practitioners, protect knowledge systems, maintain cultural integrity, and connect wellness activities with community and environmental well-being. Rather than treating wellness solely as a commercial service, tourism can contribute to the continued transmission and responsible adaptation of Thai wellness traditions.

Regenerative tourism also aligns with regenerative, circular, and well-being economies. These perspectives question development models that prioritise continuous economic expansion without sufficiently considering ecological limits, social equity, or community well-being. Circular approaches seek to reduce waste and retain materials within productive systems, while well-being economies evaluate progress through improvements in human and ecological welfare. Regenerative tourism connects these principles by encouraging tourism activities that restore resources, circulate benefits locally, and strengthen the capacity of destinations to adapt and flourish.

Visitors may also contribute to regeneration. Tourism experiences can include habitat restoration, conservation activities, cultural workshops, citizen science, community projects, and support for local enterprises. However, visitor participation should respond to locally identified needs rather

than being designed merely as a marketing feature. Communities and relevant experts should determine which activities are appropriate and how they should be conducted.

Implementing regenerative tourism nevertheless presents significant challenges. The concept remains relatively new, and interpretations vary across researchers, policymakers, destination planners, and businesses. Empirical research shows that some destination planners remain uncertain about how regenerative tourism differs from existing sustainable-tourism approaches and how its principles should be translated into operational strategies (Pung et al., 2024).

Measurement is another challenge. Regenerative outcomes, including cultural vitality, community empowerment, ecosystem health, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission, are more difficult to measure than visitor numbers or tourism expenditure. Destinations therefore require place-specific indicators developed with local communities. Possible indicators include the number of active cultural practitioners, youth participation in traditional activities, locally retained tourism income, ecological restoration outcomes, resident well-being, community decision-making power, and the continuity of cultural practices.

Regenerative tourism also requires long-term governance and cross-sector collaboration. Government agencies, communities, tourism businesses, cultural organizations, educational institutions, environmental groups, and visitors must coordinate their roles and responsibilities. Power imbalances must be addressed because regenerative terminology can

otherwise be adopted by external organizations without transferring meaningful authority or benefits to local communities. Regenerative tourism should not become a promotional label applied to conventional tourism products without evidence of positive social, cultural, and environmental outcomes.

Ultimately, regenerative tourism represents an evolution in how the relationship between tourism, place, and culture is understood. Rather than viewing cultural and natural resources merely as attractions to be consumed, regenerative approaches recognize them as living systems that must be cared for, strengthened, and renewed. Tourism becomes a potential mechanism for cultural revitalization, community resilience, environmental restoration, and equitable value creation.

For destinations rich in cultural capital, regeneration requires continued investment in people, knowledge, relationships, cultural practices, and ecosystems. When tourism is locally grounded, community-led, and supported by effective governance, it can contribute not only to preserving what already exists but also to creating the conditions through which destinations and their communities can flourish across generations.

10.3 Future Tourist Behaviour

Understanding future tourist behaviour is essential for destinations seeking to remain competitive in an increasingly dynamic and uncertain tourism environment. Tourist preferences are continually shaped by technological innovation, demographic transition, economic conditions, environmental concerns, changing social values, and global disruptions. The post-pandemic period accelerated expectations concerning health, flexibility, digital convenience, sustainability, safety, and the quality of visitor experiences. However, the "future tourist" should not be treated as a single, homogeneous market. Future demand will become increasingly diverse, requiring destinations to respond to different motivations, capabilities, lifestyles, and levels of technological engagement (OECD, 2026).

One of the most influential behavioural shifts is the growing preference for meaningful and experience-based travel. Rather than focusing exclusively on sightseeing or passive consumption, many tourists increasingly seek experiences that provide personal enrichment, emotional connection, learning, creativity, and cultural immersion. This development reflects the experience economy, in which value is generated through memorable emotional, intellectual, sensory, and participatory encounters rather than through products and services alone (Pine & Gilmore, 2019).

Future tourists are also likely to place greater value on participation and co-creation. Activities such as cooking classes, craft workshops, community visits, cultural festivals, agricultural experiences, and local storytelling allow visitors to become

active participants in the tourism experience. Contemporary co-creation increasingly connects tourists, businesses, communities, and digital technologies, creating opportunities for more personalized and inclusive experiences. Nevertheless, co-creation must be managed ethically to ensure that community participation, cultural preservation, and local empowerment are not subordinated to visitor expectations (Borges-Tiago & Avelar, 2025).

This experiential orientation strengthens the importance of authenticity and a sense of place. Future tourists may increasingly move beyond highly standardized attractions and seek encounters that communicate how local people live, work, create, celebrate, and understand their communities. Destinations that transform cultural capital into meaningful experiences will therefore be better positioned to build visitor attachment and differentiation. However, authenticity should not be interpreted as the preservation of culture in an unchanging form. It should emerge through respectful interaction with living communities and evolving cultural practices.

A second major trend is the increasing importance of wellness and quality of life in travel decision-making. Population ageing, urban stress, mental-health concerns, and growing interest in preventive health are expanding demand for experiences that support physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being.

Future wellness travellers are likely to seek more than conventional spa services. Their interests may include nature immersion, mindfulness, healthy cuisine, sleep improvement,

physical activity, thermal experiences, cultural healing traditions, longevity programmes, and opportunities for personal renewal. These demands create considerable opportunities for Thailand because traditional Thai massage, herbal knowledge, Buddhist philosophy, meditation, local cuisine, and nature-based experiences are already embedded in the country's cultural capital. These traditions should nevertheless be represented responsibly, supported by qualified practitioners, and protected from exaggerated or medically unsupported claims.

Travel may also become more closely connected with healthy ageing. Tourism can contribute to older adults' quality of life through physical activity, cultural participation, social interaction, recreation, positive emotions, and opportunities for continued learning. As ageing populations expand, destinations will need to provide accessible transportation, suitable accommodation, clear information, comfortable environments, healthcare support, and tourism experiences designed for different levels of physical and cognitive ability (Hu et al., 2023).

Digital transformation will continue to influence how tourists imagine, plan, purchase, experience, and evaluate travel. Travellers increasingly use digital platforms, online reviews, social media, mobile applications, and AI-supported systems throughout the visitor journey. Artificial intelligence can compare destinations, generate itineraries, translate information, recommend activities, answer questions, and adjust plans according to changing circumstances. Consequently, future tourists may expect tourism services to be immediate,

interconnected, multilingual, and available across multiple digital channels (OECD, 2026).

Personalization is likely to become a particularly important expectation. Tourism organizations can use data analytics and AI to recommend experiences based on travellers' interests, budgets, mobility requirements, previous behaviour, location, and real-time destination conditions. Personalized itineraries, cultural programmes, wellness packages, dining recommendations, and accessibility information can improve convenience and perceived relevance. Research indicates, however, that the adoption of AI-supported tourism services depends not only on personalization but also on perceived value, trust, transparent practices, and responsible data use (Koo et al., 2025).

The increasing use of AI also creates risks. Travellers may receive inaccurate recommendations, fabricated cultural information, biased results, or excessively commercialized suggestions. The collection of behavioural and location data raises concerns regarding privacy, cybersecurity, surveillance, and the commercial ownership of tourist information. Destinations should therefore combine personalization with transparency, consent, data protection, and human oversight. Digital convenience will strengthen competitiveness only when travellers consider the technology reliable, secure, and trustworthy.

Technological advancement may simultaneously generate a countertrend toward digital disconnection. As digital media become more pervasive in everyday life, some travellers may

seek opportunities to slow down, reduce screen use, reconnect with nature, and participate in direct human interaction. Research on walking and pilgrimage destinations shows that slow travel and digital disconnection can support immersion, presence, conviviality, and a deeper engagement with place, although travellers vary in how they interpret and respond to expectations concerning disconnection (Syvertsen & Jorge, 2026).

Future tourism demand is therefore unlikely to involve a simple choice between digital and non-digital experiences. Travellers may expect seamless digital support for reservations, transportation, safety, translation, and accessibility while also seeking periods in which technology becomes less visible. Successful destinations will design technology that reduces inconvenience without dominating the cultural, sensory, and interpersonal dimensions of the experience.

Sustainability will remain an influential but complex factor in tourist behaviour. Large-scale consumer research indicates strong interest in sustainable travel, local culture, and community benefit. In Booking.com's 2025 survey of 32,000 travellers across 34 countries and territories, 77% reported seeking authentic experiences representative of local culture, while 73% wanted their expenditure to benefit local communities. Travellers also expressed interest in visiting alternative destinations or travelling at different times to reduce overcrowding (Booking.com, 2025). These findings should nevertheless be interpreted as reported attitudes and intentions rather than direct evidence that all travellers consistently make sustainable choices.

The gap between sustainable intentions and actual behaviour remains significant. Price, convenience, time, habit, accessibility, and the availability of trustworthy information can prevent travellers from acting according to their stated environmental and social values. Booking.com's earlier 2024 findings similarly showed that although 83% considered sustainable travel important, 45% did not regard it as a primary consideration when planning or booking a trip (Booking.com, 2024). Destinations should therefore make responsible choices convenient, affordable, credible, and clearly communicated rather than expecting travellers to accept substantial personal costs or inconvenience.

Generational differences **(Figure 149)** will further diversify future tourism markets. Younger travellers are frequently associated with digital connectivity, experiential consumption, cultural diversity, and sustainability. However, Generation Z should not automatically be treated as consistently more sustainable than other groups. Research identifies a recurring gap between Gen Z's environmental attitudes and actual travel behaviour, which may still be shaped by price, convenience, lifestyle aspirations, social media, and opportunities for frequent travel (Seyfi et al., 2025).

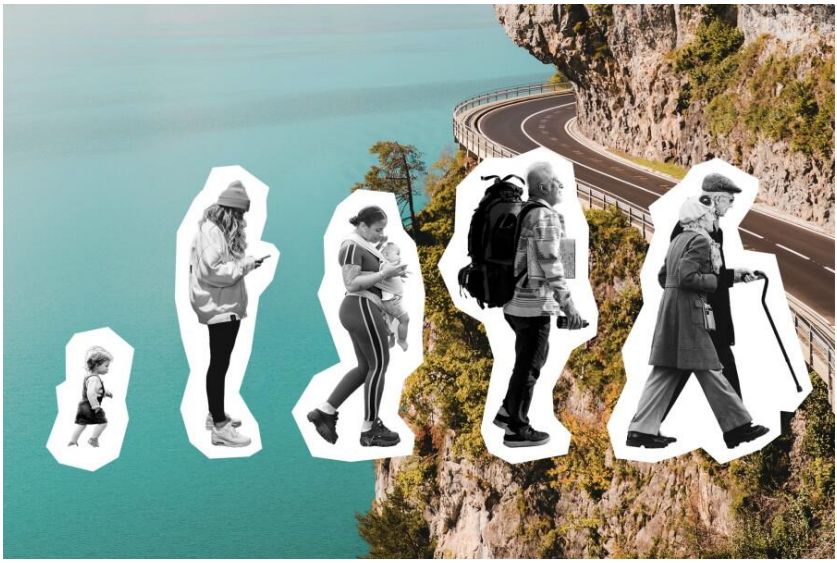


Figure 149. Generational Differences
Source: Elizabeth See via Unsplash

Older travellers, meanwhile, may seek comfort, accessibility, cultural learning, wellness, security, and opportunities for social engagement. They may also possess greater schedule flexibility and, in some markets, substantial purchasing power. Destinations will consequently need to avoid designing tourism exclusively around a single age group. Universal design, flexible pacing, multilingual interpretation, accessible digital interfaces, and options for multigenerational participation will become increasingly important.

Future tourists are also likely to place greater value on cultural diversity and intercultural learning. Although globalization and digital media expose travellers to cultures from

around the world, they can also contribute to cultural standardization and the repetition of similar tourism products across destinations. This may increase demand for distinctive local food, crafts, architecture, festivals, performing arts, histories, spiritual traditions, and everyday lifestyles. Cultural capital will therefore remain an important source of differentiation, particularly when experiences are grounded in local knowledge and community participation.

At the same time, increased interest in local culture creates responsibilities for travellers and tourism organizations. Cultural experiences should not reduce communities to objects of observation or transform sacred, private, or socially significant practices into unrestricted entertainment. Future tourists may increasingly expect transparency regarding cultural ownership, appropriate visitor behaviour, community benefits, and the authenticity of interpretation. Destinations should therefore communicate not only what visitors can experience but also how they can participate respectfully.

Flexibility and resilience will also shape future behaviour. Travellers increasingly face extreme weather, health risks, geopolitical tensions, transportation disruption, and economic uncertainty. They may seek flexible cancellation policies, real-time information, travel insurance, alternative itineraries, less crowded destinations, and greater confidence in destination-management systems. Climate conditions may also influence the timing and location of travel, encouraging some visitors to avoid periods of extreme heat, wildfire risk, flooding, or excessive congestion.

For Thailand, these behavioural changes create substantial opportunities. The country's heritage, cuisine, wellness traditions, creative industries, natural environments, festivals, and community-based tourism resources correspond closely with demand for meaningful, restorative, participatory, and culturally distinctive experiences. Future competitiveness will depend on transforming these resources into experiences that are accessible, responsible, digitally supported, and rooted in local cultural meaning.

Thailand should therefore avoid treating future tourism development solely as a matter of attracting more visitors. Greater attention should be directed toward experience quality, visitor dispersal, community benefit, cultural integrity, inclusive design, credible sustainability practices, and the responsible use of digital technologies. Tourism personnel and community enterprises will also require skills in storytelling, intercultural communication, AI literacy, experience design, wellness service delivery, and cultural interpretation.

Accordingly, future tourist behaviour will be characterized by the interaction of several potentially contradictory expectations. Travellers may seek personalization while protecting their privacy, digital convenience while desiring disconnection, authenticity while expecting comfort, and sustainability while remaining sensitive to price and convenience. Destinations that understand and manage these tensions will be better positioned to create experiences that are competitive, meaningful, responsible, and beneficial to both visitors and host communities.

10.4 Cultural Innovation

Cultural innovation has emerged as an important factor shaping the future competitiveness and resilience of tourism destinations. Traditionally, tourism innovation focused primarily on infrastructure, service processes, transportation, marketing, and technological development. Contemporary tourism, however, increasingly recognizes culture itself as a source and subject of innovation. Cultural traditions, heritage, knowledge, artistic expressions, and ways of life can be interpreted and activated in new forms that respond to changing audiences while retaining their cultural significance.

In this context, cultural innovation refers to the process through which cultural resources are creatively adapted, reinterpreted, combined, communicated, or applied to generate new social, experiential, and economic value. It does not imply abandoning tradition or replacing established cultural practices with modern products. Rather, it involves creating meaningful relationships between continuity and change. UNESCO identifies cultural diversity as an important source of creativity and innovation while emphasizing that cultural transformation should respect cultural rights, community identities, and the diversity of cultural expressions (UNESCO, 2022).

Cultural innovation may occur through the development of tourism experiences, creative products, interpretive narratives, digital platforms, business models, partnerships, or approaches to cultural governance. It can involve presenting an established tradition through a new medium, applying traditional knowledge to contemporary design, connecting cultural practitioners with new markets, or enabling visitors to participate in cultural creation. The objective is not merely to make culture commercially attractive but to ensure that cultural resources remain meaningful, accessible, and capable of generating benefits for the communities that sustain them.

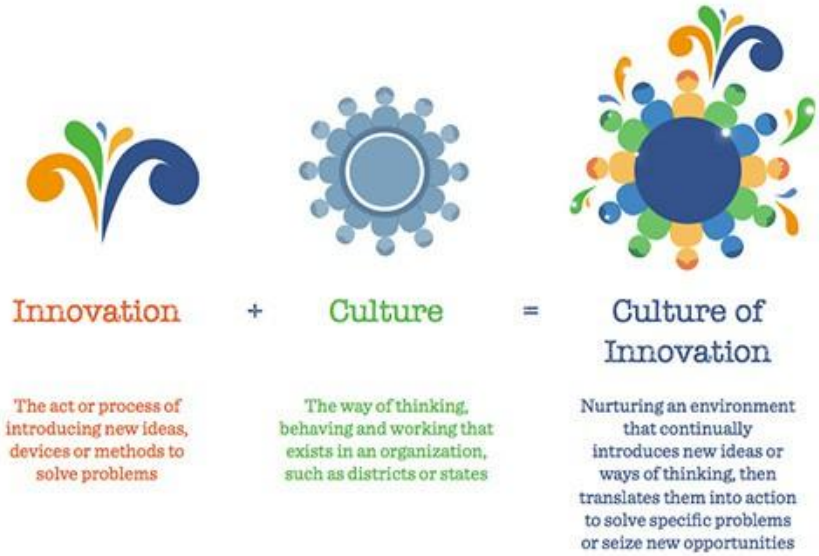


Figure 150. Culture of Innovation
Source: gettingsmart.com

As conceptually represented in **Figure 150**, a culture of innovation requires an environment that encourages creativity, experimentation, learning, collaboration, and the exchange of knowledge. Within tourism destinations, innovation rarely results from the efforts of a single organization. It develops through interactions among communities, cultural practitioners, creative entrepreneurs, tourism businesses, museums, educational institutions, government agencies, visitors, and technology providers. Cultural innovation therefore depends upon both individual creativity and supportive destination systems.

The importance of cultural innovation is reinforced by changing tourism demand. Contemporary visitors increasingly seek experiences that are participatory, immersive, educational, and personally meaningful. Heritage sites, festivals, cuisine, crafts, music, performing arts, and local knowledge must therefore be interpreted in ways that remain relevant to different audiences without weakening their cultural foundations. Creative-tourism research indicates that destination competitiveness depends upon the interaction of cultural products and processes, creative entrepreneurs, community engagement, stakeholder capabilities, an enabling creative atmosphere, and effective communication (Dias et al., 2023).

One visible form of cultural innovation is the integration of heritage with contemporary cultural and creative industries. Traditional motifs may be incorporated into fashion and product design; regional cuisine may be interpreted through contemporary culinary experiences; folk music may be

connected with modern performances; and historic environments may provide settings for film, art, festivals, and creative learning. These combinations can increase the contemporary relevance of cultural resources and create new opportunities for cultural practitioners and local enterprises.

Nevertheless, innovation should not reduce culture to decorative content or detach cultural expressions from their original meanings. The reinterpretation of heritage must consider who owns the cultural knowledge, who has authority to modify or communicate it, and who benefits economically from its use. Cultural practitioners and communities should therefore participate in deciding which cultural elements may be adapted, how they should be presented, and how revenues and recognition should be distributed.

Museums and cultural institutions are particularly important platforms for cultural innovation. Their role increasingly extends beyond collecting and displaying objects to include education, interpretation, research, community engagement, artistic experimentation, and the creation of participatory experiences. Innovative museums may combine historical collections with contemporary exhibitions, performances, workshops, digital content, and interdisciplinary learning.



Figure 151. Mekong Basin Civilization Museum
Source: Mekong Basin Civilization Museum via Facebook.com

The Mekong Basin Civilization Museum illustrates how a cultural institution can connect heritage preservation with contemporary cultural engagement. Established at Mae Fah Luang University, the museum collects cultural objects, photographs, documentary materials, and knowledge associated with the Greater Mekong Subregion. It also organizes cultural activities and exhibitions that connect regional heritage with contemporary artistic expression. The institution consequently functions not only as a repository but also as a learning and cultural-development platform (Mae Fah Luang University, 2018).

The example in **Figure 151** demonstrates that cultural innovation does not always require altering cultural objects themselves. Innovation may instead occur through new curatorial approaches, interdisciplinary exhibitions, educational activities, community partnerships, and connections between historical collections and contemporary issues. Such approaches can help museums attract broader audiences while strengthening their roles in cultural transmission, dialogue, and regional identity.

Digital technologies have become powerful enablers of cultural innovation. Augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, mobile applications, digital archives, interactive displays, and immersive storytelling can help visitors visualize historical environments, obtain multilingual interpretation, and engage with cultural narratives through different sensory and learning formats. Research indicates that AR and VR can improve heritage recognition, facilitate access, enrich learning, and strengthen visitors' engagement and satisfaction when the

technologies are appropriately integrated into the cultural experience (Shafiee Roodposhti & Esmaeelbeigi, 2024).

Digital innovation should, however, be guided by cultural content rather than technological novelty alone. Poorly designed systems may distract visitors, simplify complex histories, reproduce stereotypes, or provide inaccurate cultural information. Digital experiences should therefore be developed collaboratively with historians, cultural practitioners, communities, designers, and intended users. They should also remain accessible to visitors who lack advanced devices or digital skills.

Thailand has considerable potential to combine disruptive technologies with its historical and cultural resources. Research on the Thai tourism context identifies opportunities for AR, VR, mobile applications, and related technologies to enrich cultural interpretation and support sustainable tourism development. However, their effective adoption requires collaboration, appropriate infrastructure, institutional capabilities, accurate cultural content, and sensitivity to the social context of heritage (Ma et al., 2024).

Cultural entrepreneurship represents another important mechanism for innovation. Artists, designers, chefs, performers, craft producers, community enterprises, and tourism entrepreneurs can transform cultural knowledge into new products, services, and experiences. Creative tourism, gastronomic tourism, film tourism, wellness tourism, and community-based tourism all demonstrate how cultural resources

can support entrepreneurial activity and destination differentiation.

However, successful cultural entrepreneurship requires more than individual creativity. Entrepreneurs need access to finance, business knowledge, design capabilities, digital skills, market information, distribution channels, and intellectual-property protection. They also require supportive networks connecting cultural practitioners with tourism organizations, universities, government agencies, and creative industries. UNCTAD emphasizes that the creative industries can contribute significantly to trade and economic development but also warns that market concentration, unequal digital access, and uneven participation may restrict innovation and the equitable distribution of benefits (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2024).

Evidence from cultural heritage tourism in Thailand further indicates that innovation depends upon the interaction of cultural values, facilities, pricing, human-resource capabilities, and tourism management. This suggests that cultural creativity alone is insufficient; innovation must be supported by competent personnel, appropriate infrastructure, and effective destination management (Luekveerawattana, 2024).

For Thailand, cultural innovation offers considerable opportunities because the country possesses diverse heritage, gastronomy, wellness knowledge, crafts, festivals, performing arts, creative industries, and community traditions. Traditional textiles may be connected with contemporary fashion and sustainable design; regional cuisines may support innovative

culinary routes; local stories may be communicated through film and immersive media; and traditional wellness practices may be integrated into carefully designed learning and well-being experiences.

Thailand's cultural diversity also means that innovation should not result in the creation of a single standardized representation of Thai culture. Different regions and communities possess distinctive histories, identities, languages, artistic traditions, and knowledge systems. Place-based innovation should therefore build upon these differences rather than simplifying them to fit a uniform national image.

The future success of cultural innovation will depend upon the ability to balance creativity with cultural integrity. Innovation that is disconnected from community knowledge may generate short-term commercial attention but weaken authenticity, cultural ownership, and public trust. Conversely, cultural management that rejects all adaptation may limit the ability of traditions and institutions to engage younger generations and respond to social change.

Cultural innovation should therefore be understood as a responsible and participatory process. It requires cultural research, community leadership, creative experimentation, appropriate technology, fair remuneration, intellectual-property protection, and continuous evaluation of cultural and social impacts. When these conditions are established, cultural innovation can contribute to cultural revitalization, destination competitiveness, creative employment, visitor engagement, and the continued transmission of cultural capital to future generations.

10.5 Thailand's Tourism Vision 2040

Thailand's tourism vision toward 2040 should represent a fundamental transition from an industry driven primarily by visitor volume toward a high-value, resilient, inclusive, regenerative, and culturally grounded tourism economy. This proposed long-term vision builds upon the Third National Tourism Development Plan (2023–2027), which is guided by the concept *Building Forward a Better Tourism for All* and integrates social, economic, environmental, and cultural considerations through the triple-bottom-line approach. Its four strategic pillars—resilient tourism, quality tourism, tourism experience, and sustainable tourism—provide an important policy foundation for developing a longer-term national direction (OECD, 2026).

A proposed vision may therefore be articulated as follows:

"By 2040, Thailand will be a globally leading destination for high-value and regenerative tourism, where cultural capital, natural heritage, innovation, and Thai hospitality create meaningful visitor experiences, shared prosperity, resilient communities, and flourishing environments.

This vision reflects Thailand's continuing transition from tourism based on quantity toward tourism centred on quality, balance, and long-term value. Current national tourism directions emphasize the principle of *Value over Volume*, together with experience-led travel, wellness, creative industries, digital connectivity, regional income distribution, environmental responsibility, and meaningful cultural engagement (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2025, 2026).

Under the 2040 vision, tourism success should no longer be evaluated only through international arrivals and total receipts. These indicators will remain economically relevant, particularly for forecasting infrastructure, workforce, and service requirements, but they should be considered alongside average visitor expenditure, length of stay, locally retained income, employment quality, regional distribution, cultural vitality, resource efficiency, visitor satisfaction, resident well-being, and destination resilience. This broader approach is consistent with the Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism, which integrates tourism's economic, social, and

environmental dimensions within a common measurement framework (UN Tourism, 2024).

Achieving this vision requires an integrated national tourism ecosystem structured around six strategic pillars: high-value and culturally grounded tourism; connected, accessible, and smart destinations; human-capital transformation; climate-resilient and regenerative development; collaborative governance and adaptive planning; and cultural-capital management supported by multidimensional performance measurement.

10.5.1 High-Value and Culturally Grounded Tourism

The first strategic pillar concerns the development of distinctive tourism offerings that generate meaningful value for visitors, communities, businesses, and cultural practitioners. Thailand possesses extensive cultural, natural, creative, gastronomic, spiritual, sporting, and wellness resources. Their tourism value, however, depends upon how effectively they are interpreted, combined, and transformed into experiences that are relevant to contemporary visitors.

High-value tourism should not be defined exclusively by premium prices or wealthy market segments. It should refer to tourism that produces substantial experiential, economic, social, and cultural benefits while creating proportionately lower environmental and community costs. Cultural tourism, community-based tourism, gastronomy, wellness, creative tourism, sports tourism, educational travel, nature-based tourism, and festivals can all contribute to high-value development when they are professionally designed and responsibly managed.

Future tourism offerings should move beyond standardized sightseeing packages toward experiences that encourage learning, participation, emotional connection, creativity, and personal transformation. Thai cuisine, traditional medicine, Thai massage, meditation, Muay Thai, festivals, crafts, performing arts, local agriculture, community lifestyles, and creative industries can provide the foundations for such experiences. The Tourism Authority of Thailand's current strategic framework similarly identifies wellness, subcultures, film, sports, creative communities, night-time activities,

circularity, and digital platforms as major components of value-oriented tourism development (TAT, 2026).

Cultural resources should not, however, be treated merely as commodities for visitor consumption. Cultural practitioners and local communities should participate in identifying cultural assets, determining which elements may be shared, interpreting their meanings, designing tourism experiences, and deciding how benefits are distributed. This participation can help tourism strengthen cultural identity, community pride, artisan livelihoods, and intergenerational knowledge transmission while reducing the risks of simplification, misrepresentation, and excessive commercialization.

The UNESCO-supported programme in Nan Old City illustrates the potential of integrating living heritage, community-based tourism, creative experience design, youth participation, cultural inventorying, and intercultural learning. The initiative emphasized that local culture can support inclusive tourism when communities and younger generations participate actively in interpretation, experience development, and the transmission of cultural knowledge (UNESCO, 2024).

Diversification should also involve a more balanced spatial and seasonal distribution of tourism. Bangkok, Phuket, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, and established island destinations will continue to function as major gateways, but future development should connect visitors more effectively with secondary cities, rural areas, border regions, creative districts, heritage towns, and emerging cultural landscapes. Thailand's Equitable Tourism approach already seeks to redistribute benefits, strengthen

domestic value chains, stimulate travel to secondary destinations, and support community-based tourism rooted in local identity (OECD, 2026).

Thematic routes linking gastronomy, heritage, wellness, crafts, film, nature, spirituality, agriculture, and local lifestyles could encourage visitors to remain longer and explore multiple destinations. However, dispersal should not simply redirect high visitor volumes toward communities with limited infrastructure or management capacity. Development must consider local consent, carrying capacity, environmental conditions, cultural sensitivity, and the readiness of host communities.

Destination branding should be integrated into this strategic pillar rather than treated as an isolated promotional activity. Thailand's future brand should emerge from the actual quality, integrity, and distinctiveness of visitor experiences. Claims concerning authenticity, wellness, safety, sustainability, hospitality, and community benefit must be demonstrated through credible practices and standards. Thailand can position itself as a destination combining cultural depth, creativity, holistic well-being, technological convenience, environmental responsibility, and meaningful human connection. Such positioning would distinguish the country through both emotional appeal and verifiable destination quality.

10.5.2 Connected, Accessible, and Smart Destinations

The second strategic pillar concerns the integration of physical infrastructure, digital systems, accessibility, and destination capacity. By 2040, tourism infrastructure should function as a connected ecosystem linking international gateways with provinces, secondary cities, communities, and individual attractions. Airports, railways, roads, ports, public transportation, pedestrian networks, and digital mobility services should provide reliable, safe, and seamless travel throughout the country.

Infrastructure planning must extend beyond major transportation projects. Water supply, sanitation, waste management, energy systems, public restrooms, signage, emergency services, pedestrian safety, internet connectivity, public spaces, and destination maintenance all influence visitor experience and resident quality of life. Visitor-volume forecasts will remain necessary for planning these services even when national strategy prioritizes value rather than volume.

Infrastructure development must also be sensitive to place. Large projects should not damage cultural landscapes, displace communities, intensify environmental pressures, or create built environments that are visually and socially disconnected from local identity. Destination design should combine functionality with local architecture, landscape aesthetics, climate adaptation, cultural meaning, and environmental protection.

Universal accessibility should become a standard principle of tourism development. Thailand's ageing population and increasingly diverse visitor markets will generate greater

demand for destinations that accommodate different levels of mobility, sensory ability, health, communication, and digital literacy. Accessibility should therefore be integrated into transportation, accommodation, heritage sites, attractions, interpretation, digital platforms, emergency systems, and public facilities rather than treated as an optional or specialized service.

Digital infrastructure will be equally important. Artificial intelligence, integrated databases, smart mobility systems, multilingual assistance, digital mapping, predictive analytics, and immersive interpretation can support every stage of the visitor journey. Thailand has already introduced measures such as centralized arrival information, integrated visitor portals, digital tourism platforms, and AI-supported connections between tourism demand and supply (OECD, 2026; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2026).

An integrated national tourism-data ecosystem could assist public agencies and destination managers in understanding visitor flows, expenditure patterns, congestion, infrastructure pressure, market changes, environmental conditions, and emerging risks. Real-time information could support crowd dispersal, transport coordination, emergency communication, personalized recommendations, and carrying-capacity management.

Digital transformation should also strengthen smaller businesses and community enterprises. Local operators require affordable access to digital distribution, electronic payment, data services, online marketing, cybersecurity support, and AI-enabled tools. Without such access, digitalization may

concentrate market power among large corporations and global platforms while increasing economic leakage from destinations.

Technology can also broaden cultural access through virtual museums, digital archives, augmented-reality interpretation, multilingual guides, and immersive storytelling. Nevertheless, digital experiences should complement rather than replace encounters with local people, physical heritage, cultural landscapes, and living traditions. The effectiveness of a smart destination should be assessed by whether technology improves accessibility, safety, destination management, community benefit, and visitor understanding—not by the number of applications or digital systems introduced.

10.5.3 Human-Capital Transformation and Thai Hospitality

The third strategic pillar is human-capital transformation. The quality and resilience of Thailand's future tourism economy will depend heavily on the knowledge, skills, adaptability, and well-being of its workforce. Population ageing, labour shortages, migration patterns, changing employment expectations, and rapid technological disruption will require comprehensive workforce planning rather than reliance on isolated short-term training programmes.

Future workforce strategies should incorporate demographic and labour-market scenarios. These may include retaining and reskilling older employees, improving working conditions, creating flexible employment models, attracting

younger workers, strengthening migrant-worker protections, and using technology to support labour-intensive services. Tourism employment should offer clearer career progression, appropriate remuneration, professional recognition, workplace safety, and opportunities for lifelong learning.

Tourism personnel will require competencies extending beyond traditional hospitality operations. Important future capabilities will include digital literacy, artificial intelligence, data interpretation, intercultural communication, foreign languages, sustainability management, climate awareness, crisis response, universal service design, cultural interpretation, storytelling, creativity, and visitor-experience design.

Community entrepreneurs and cultural practitioners will also need targeted support. Skills in product development, financial management, digital distribution, intellectual-property protection, responsible marketing, quality assurance, and collaborative business models can help communities retain greater value from tourism. Educational institutions, public agencies, tourism businesses, and community organizations should therefore cooperate in developing flexible training, microcredentials, reskilling programmes, and work-integrated learning.

Technology should assist rather than replace human hospitality. Automated check-in, intelligent translation, itinerary planning, virtual assistants, service robots, and AI-supported customer service may improve efficiency and reduce routine workloads. However, Thailand's tourism competitiveness will continue to depend substantially on empathy, cultural

understanding, flexibility, emotional intelligence, and personal interaction.

The objective should be to develop hybrid service systems in which technology manages repetitive or information-intensive tasks while human personnel provide warmth, contextual understanding, problem-solving, creativity, and culturally sensitive service. Thai hospitality should therefore remain a central competitive strength, but it must be supported by professional standards, fair employment, continuous training, and an organizational culture that enables employees to deliver high-quality service.

Human-capital policy should also recognize the role of local knowledge. Tour guides, artisans, cooks, farmers, healers, performers, monks, community leaders, and cultural practitioners possess forms of expertise that cannot be replaced by standardized training or automated information. Their knowledge should be acknowledged, protected, fairly remunerated, and integrated into tourism education and experience design.

10.5.4 Climate-Resilient and Regenerative Tourism

The fourth strategic pillar concerns environmental sustainability, climate resilience, and regeneration. By 2040, climate change is likely to influence tourism seasonality, visitor comfort, infrastructure reliability, destination safety, water availability, and the condition of natural and cultural resources. Thailand faces significant exposure to flooding, drought, extreme heat, coastal erosion, and water scarcity, all of which

have implications for tourism destinations and local livelihoods (World Bank, 2025).

Environmental sustainability must therefore become a condition of tourism development rather than a promotional theme. Tourism planning should incorporate climate-risk assessment, early-warning systems, water security, renewable energy, resource-efficient buildings, low-carbon transportation, ecosystem-based adaptation, waste reduction, and climate-sensitive public-space design.

Historic cities will require strategies for managing extreme heat while preserving architectural and cultural integrity. Coastal and island destinations will need stronger systems for water management, shoreline protection, waste treatment, ecosystem conservation, and emergency evacuation. Mountain and forest destinations will require planning for wildfire, biodiversity loss, erosion, and changing seasonal conditions.

Carrying capacity should be determined according to ecological, physical, social, cultural, and managerial conditions. It should not be treated simply as the maximum number of visitors who can enter a site. Visitor management should consider crowding, resident tolerance, infrastructure limitations, heritage vulnerability, environmental quality, and the ability of local organizations to manage tourism responsibly.

Regenerative tourism provides an important long-term direction, although its full conceptual foundations have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Within the 2040 vision, regeneration should involve measurable improvements to the

places where tourism occurs. Tourism revenue, investment, and visitor participation could contribute to mangrove restoration, forest conservation, watershed protection, cultural-landscape rehabilitation, heritage maintenance, traditional food systems, craft transmission, and community well-being.

Regenerative programmes should be based on locally identified needs and expert guidance. Conservation or cultural activities should not be converted into superficial visitor entertainment. Communities, environmental specialists, cultural practitioners, and destination managers should determine appropriate objectives, methods, limits, and indicators.

Thailand's climate and development strategies emphasize that adaptation, resilience, and green investment are essential to future economic competitiveness. Climate-resilient tourism should therefore be integrated with national infrastructure, energy, transport, conservation, and community-development policies rather than pursued through isolated tourism projects (World Bank, 2025).

10.5.5 Collaborative Governance, Safety, and Adaptive Planning

The fifth strategic pillar concerns governance and institutional capacity. Governance connects all other elements of the 2040 vision because infrastructure, sustainability, cultural management, digital systems, human-capital development, and destination safety require coordinated action across multiple organizations.

Thailand's tourism system involves the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Department of Tourism, DASTA, provincial and local authorities, transport agencies, cultural institutions, environmental organizations, tourism businesses, educational institutions, communities, and civil-society groups. Existing policy structures provide mechanisms for national coordination, licensing, standards, marketing, area-based development, local infrastructure, and destination risk management (OECD, 2026).

Nevertheless, fragmented responsibilities can produce overlapping mandates, inconsistent standards, delayed intervention, and gaps between national policy and local implementation. Thailand's Tourism Vision 2040 should therefore establish stronger mechanisms for interagency cooperation, integrated planning, shared data, transparent decision-making, and destination-level accountability.

Local governments and communities require sufficient authority, financial resources, personnel, and technical capacity to manage tourism according to local conditions. Destination management organizations could provide formal platforms through which public agencies, businesses, residents, cultural practitioners, researchers, and civil-society organizations jointly plan and evaluate tourism development.

Community participation should involve genuine influence rather than consultation after major decisions have already been made. Local stakeholders should participate in land-use planning, tourism-product development, heritage

interpretation, visitor management, cultural-resource decisions, and the allocation of tourism benefits.

Safety must remain an integral component of governance. It includes crime prevention, transportation safety, public health, food safety, disaster preparedness, cybersecurity, consumer protection, legal tourism operations, multilingual assistance, and coordinated emergency response. Safety should be understood not only as the absence of incidents but also as the ability to identify risks, communicate clearly, assist visitors rapidly, and maintain trust during disruptions.

Institutional reform may also be required in relation to platform regulation, taxation, professional licensing, land use, environmental standards, cultural and intellectual-property ownership, medical and wellness tourism, labour protection, and data privacy. Long-term destination competitiveness cannot be sustained through marketing alone when regulatory systems remain fragmented or unable to respond to technological, environmental, and social change.

Because 2040 remains distant, tourism planning should not rely on a single forecast of arrivals, expenditure, or market composition. Thailand should apply scenario-based planning to examine how different combinations of climate change, demographic ageing, labour migration, geopolitical instability, pandemics, energy transition, artificial intelligence, transport innovation, and changing consumer values could reshape tourism.

Possible scenarios could include technology-intensive tourism, climate-constrained tourism, wellness-led tourism, community-regenerative tourism, or repeated global disruption. Each scenario would generate different requirements for infrastructure, workforce development, regulation, destination management, and investment. Strategies that perform effectively across several scenarios should receive priority because they increase resilience under uncertain conditions.

Adaptive planning also requires regular review. The 2040 vision should be implemented through shorter action cycles, measurable milestones, and periodic revision rather than through a fixed plan that remains unchanged for more than a decade.

10.5.6 Cultural Capital and Measurement of the 2040 Vision

The final strategic pillar places cultural capital at the centre of Thailand's future tourism system. Cultural resources should be systematically identified, preserved, activated, interpreted, and transformed into value through community participation, creative innovation, and responsible experience design.

Identification requires destinations to document tangible and intangible cultural resources, cultural practitioners, community knowledge, creative networks, and cultural landscapes. Preservation involves protecting physical heritage and supporting the continued practice and transmission of living culture. Activation connects these resources with tourism through interpretation, storytelling, experience design, entrepreneurship, and appropriate technology.

Value creation should extend beyond visitor expenditure. Cultural capital can generate employment, local enterprise, learning, cultural pride, social cohesion, destination identity, international visibility, and intergenerational transmission. Sustainability and regeneration require that part of the value produced through tourism be reinvested in communities, practitioners, cultural education, heritage conservation, and environmental stewardship.

The implementation of Thailand's Tourism Vision 2040 should therefore be supported by multidimensional indicators.

Dimension	Illustrative indicators for 2040
Economic value	Average expenditure, length of stay, locally retained income, SME participation, employment quality
Cultural vitality	Active cultural practitioners, youth participation, heritage condition, continuity of traditional knowledge
Social inclusion	Resident satisfaction, community decision-making, accessibility, equitable benefit distribution
Environmental performance	Carbon emissions, water and energy intensity, waste reduction, ecosystem restoration
Destination balance	Regional and seasonal distribution of visitors, pressure on major destinations
Experience quality	Visitor satisfaction, perceived authenticity, repeat visitation, quality-standard compliance
Human capital	Workforce retention, professional development, digital capability, cultural-interpretation skills
Resilience	Climate preparedness, crisis-response capacity, business continuity, infrastructure reliability
Governance	Local participation, shared data, destination-management capacity, transparent public reporting

Specific numerical targets should be established only when credible baseline data and responsible implementing agencies have been identified. National targets should also be translated into destination-level measures because conditions differ considerably among major cities, islands, heritage towns, rural communities, coastal areas, and protected landscapes.

Public reporting should disclose progress across all dimensions rather than emphasizing only annual arrivals and revenue. Independent evaluation would strengthen accountability and reduce the risk that terms such as *high value*, *sustainability*, *regeneration*, and *community benefit* become promotional language without measurable outcomes.

Finally, Thailand's tourism success in 2040 should be judged by the quality of value created for visitors, communities, cultural practitioners, businesses, society, and the environment. Tourism should strengthen rather than exhaust the country's cultural and natural capital. By integrating cultural authenticity, human hospitality, technological innovation, universal accessibility, climate resilience, community participation, and collaborative governance, Thailand can move beyond its position as a highly visited destination and become a global model for meaningful, inclusive, and regenerative tourism.

10.6 The Thai Soft Power Tourism Model

Throughout this book, it has been argued that cultural capital serves as a strategic resource capable of generating tourism value, strengthening destination competitiveness, and enhancing national soft power. Building upon these discussions, this section proposes the Thai Soft Power Tourism Model (TSPTM) as an integrated framework for understanding how Thailand can transform cultural resources into sustainable tourism development and international influence.

The model is based on the premise that *cultural capital* represents the primary input for tourism development and soft power creation. Thailand possesses a wide range of cultural assets, including tangible heritage, intangible cultural heritage, gastronomy, wellness traditions, creative industries, local communities, and cultural lifestyles. These resources form the foundation of the model and constitute Thailand's unique source of competitive advantage.

The second component of the model involves *creative transformation*. Cultural resources do not automatically generate tourism value. They must be interpreted, packaged, communicated, and transformed into tourism experiences that are meaningful to contemporary audiences. Creative industries, cultural entrepreneurship, innovation, digital technologies, and destination management play critical roles in this transformation process.

The third component focuses on *experience creation*. Tourists increasingly seek memorable and meaningful experiences rather than simple consumption of attractions.

Cultural resources therefore become tourism products through experiences such as gastronomy tourism, wellness tourism, heritage tourism, creative tourism, festival tourism, community-based tourism, and cultural learning activities. These experiences allow visitors to engage directly with Thai culture while creating emotional and intellectual connections with destinations.

The fourth component is *international attraction* and destination branding. Positive tourism experiences contribute to destination image, visitor satisfaction, and global awareness. Visitors become ambassadors who share their experiences with others, reinforcing Thailand's reputation and expanding its international visibility. At this stage, tourism functions as a mechanism of cultural communication and nation branding.

The final component involves *soft power outcomes*. Through repeated interactions with Thai culture, visitors develop positive perceptions, emotional connections, and cultural appreciation. These outcomes strengthen Thailand's international attractiveness and influence. Soft power is therefore generated not through coercion or economic pressure but through cultural appeal and attraction.

The Thai Soft Power Tourism Model may be summarized as **Figure 152**:

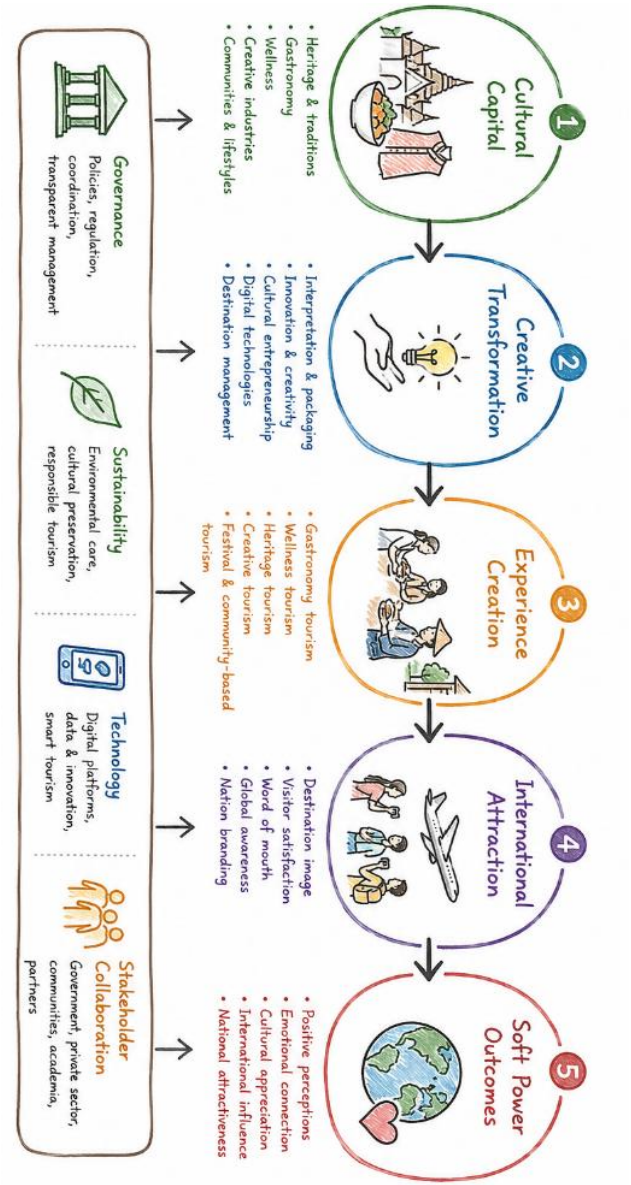


Figure 152. Thai Soft Power Tourism Model
Source: Conceptualized by the authors, with visual assistance from OpenAI.

Supporting this process are four enabling factors: governance, sustainability, technology, and stakeholder collaboration. These elements ensure that tourism development remains competitive, responsible, and culturally sustainable.

The model contributes to tourism theory by integrating concepts from cultural capital, destination management, cultural economics, soft power, and tourism development. More importantly, it provides a practical framework for policymakers and destination managers seeking to leverage Thailand's cultural resources for sustainable tourism growth and international competitiveness.

10.7 Policy Recommendations

The future success of Thailand's tourism industry will depend on coordinated and sustained action among national and local governments, tourism organizations, communities, cultural institutions, educational institutions, civil-society organizations, and private-sector stakeholders. Policy should move beyond short-term promotional campaigns and fragmented projects toward an integrated tourism system that protects cultural and natural capital, strengthens local capabilities, improves destination governance, and generates measurable benefits for residents and visitors. Thailand's emerging emphasis on value-oriented and equitable tourism provides an important foundation for this transition (OECD, 2026; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2026).

Based on the discussions throughout this book, seven policy priorities are recommended.

10.7.1 Recognize Cultural Capital as a Strategic National Asset

Cultural capital should be formally recognized as a strategic national asset that contributes to tourism competitiveness, community identity, social cohesion, creative employment, international visibility, and soft power. Tourism policy should therefore extend beyond the promotion of cultural attractions and incorporate long-term measures for cultural identification, safeguarding, transmission, interpretation, innovation, and responsible value creation.

National and local authorities should systematically map tangible and intangible cultural resources, including heritage sites, cultural landscapes, traditional knowledge, festivals, performing arts, crafts, gastronomy, wellness traditions, languages, local histories, and community lifestyles. These inventories should document not only cultural objects and attractions but also the practitioners, knowledge holders, institutions, and social relationships that sustain them.

Investment in heritage conservation, cultural education, creative industries, gastronomy, wellness traditions, and community-based tourism should be understood as investment in national resilience and competitiveness rather than discretionary cultural expenditure. UNESCO's cultural-policy framework recognizes culture as a global public good and emphasizes its contribution to sustainable development, social inclusion, creativity, and human-centred development (UNESCO, 2022).

Policy should also require that tourism-related use of cultural resources includes mechanisms for reinvestment. A proportion of tourism revenue generated from heritage sites, festivals, cultural districts, and community experiences should support conservation, cultural education, practitioner development, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. This would help ensure that tourism strengthens rather than gradually depletes the cultural resources upon which it depends.

10.7.2 Strengthen Community Authority, Ownership, and Benefit Sharing

Communities should be recognized not merely as tourism stakeholders but as custodians, creators, and rights holders of cultural capital. They should participate meaningfully in decisions concerning tourism development, cultural interpretation, land use, visitor management, and the commercial activation of local knowledge.

Community participation should extend beyond consultation. Local people should possess genuine influence over which cultural practices may be shared, how they are represented, the scale and timing of tourism activities, and how economic benefits are distributed. Community consent is especially important when tourism involves sacred traditions, Indigenous or ethnic knowledge, community histories, intellectual property, or culturally sensitive spaces.

Policies should support community enterprises, cooperatives, locally owned accommodation, local guides, craft producers, farmers, cultural practitioners, and small creative businesses. Assistance should include access to finance, digital distribution, product development, quality assurance, marketing, intellectual-property protection, financial management, and partnership-building. Research on community-based tourism enterprises in Thailand indicates that community leadership, participation, ownership, and the responsible use of cultural resources are central to long-term sustainability (Thananusak & Suriyankietkaew, 2023).

Benefit-sharing mechanisms should be transparent and locally appropriate. Policy evaluation should consider not only the total income generated by tourism but also how much remains within communities, who controls tourism enterprises, whether cultural practitioners receive fair compensation, and whether vulnerable groups can participate in emerging opportunities.

10.7.3 Embed Sustainability, Climate Resilience, and Regeneration in Tourism Planning

Sustainability should become a mandatory condition of tourism development rather than a voluntary marketing claim. Destination plans, infrastructure projects, tourism investments, and major events should be assessed against economic, social, cultural, and environmental criteria. International frameworks such as the GSTC Destination Standard provide a useful foundation for destination management, stakeholder participation, cultural protection, environmental responsibility, and transparent planning.

Tourism policies should integrate climate-risk assessment, emissions reduction, water and energy management, waste prevention, biodiversity protection, climate-sensitive infrastructure, and disaster preparedness. These measures are particularly important for coastal destinations, islands, historic cities, protected areas, and communities exposed to flooding, extreme heat, drought, and coastal erosion. The Thailand Country Climate and Development Report emphasizes the need for accelerated adaptation, emissions reduction, and green

investment to address the country's physical and transitional climate risks (World Bank, 2025).

Regenerative tourism should be introduced through clearly defined and measurable destination programmes. Tourism revenue and visitor participation may support mangrove restoration, forest rehabilitation, biodiversity conservation, cultural-landscape maintenance, traditional agriculture, craft transmission, and community well-being. However, regenerative claims should be based on demonstrable improvements rather than promotional terminology. Regenerative tourism requires systems thinking, community leadership, and a commitment to strengthening the social and ecological systems within which tourism operates (Bellato et al., 2023).

Visitor management should be guided by destination-specific carrying capacities that consider ecological conditions, infrastructure limitations, resident tolerance, cultural sensitivity, and managerial capability. Authorities should be empowered to introduce reservations, visitor dispersal, seasonal controls, transport management, zoning, or access restrictions when tourism pressures threaten community life or cultural and natural resources.

10.7.4 Develop Inclusive and Responsible Digital Tourism

Government should support the development of an integrated and inclusive digital tourism ecosystem. AI-enabled data systems, smart mobility services, digital heritage platforms, multilingual visitor assistance, and real-time destination information can improve planning, accessibility, safety, interpretation, and visitor-flow management.

A national tourism-data architecture should enable appropriate information sharing among public agencies, local authorities, tourism businesses, transportation providers, cultural institutions, and destination-management organizations. Data should support decisions concerning congestion, seasonality, expenditure, infrastructure use, environmental pressures, safety, and market change. Smaller businesses and community enterprises should receive affordable access to digital tools so that digital transformation does not increase inequality or concentrate control among large corporations and global platforms.

Digital technologies can also broaden access to cultural heritage through virtual museums, digital archives, augmented-reality interpretation, multilingual content, and immersive storytelling. AI and IoT systems may support personalized and accessible tourism services, but their implementation requires reliable infrastructure, responsible data use, and inclusive design (Suanpang & Pothipassa, 2024).

Responsible digital-tourism policy should address privacy, cybersecurity, algorithmic bias, intellectual-property

rights, cultural misrepresentation, and the accuracy of AI-generated content. Communities and cultural practitioners should participate in determining how cultural information is digitized, stored, interpreted, and commercially used. Human oversight should remain essential, particularly when technologies communicate cultural history, religious beliefs, traditional knowledge, or community identity.

10.7.5 Transform Tourism Human Capital and Support Cultural Practitioners

Thailand requires a long-term human-capital strategy capable of responding to population ageing, labour shortages, technological change, climate risks, and evolving visitor expectations. Tourism education and workforce development should move beyond conventional hospitality operations to include AI literacy, data interpretation, sustainability management, crisis preparedness, universal design, cultural interpretation, storytelling, intercultural communication, and experience design.

Universities, vocational institutions, tourism businesses, public agencies, and communities should cooperate in developing flexible learning pathways, microcredentials, work-integrated education, reskilling, and lifelong-learning programmes. Particular attention should be given to community entrepreneurs, guides, artisans, cooks, performers, wellness practitioners, and other cultural knowledge holders whose expertise may not be formally recognized through conventional qualifications.

Policies should also improve employment quality. Fair remuneration, career progression, social protection, safe working conditions, professional recognition, and opportunities for continuous development are necessary to retain skilled personnel and maintain service quality. Technology should be used to support employees and reduce repetitive workloads rather than simply replace human labour.

Thai hospitality will remain an important source of destination differentiation, but it should be understood as a professional capability rather than an unlimited cultural expectation placed on frontline workers. Empathy, flexibility, cultural understanding, and personal interaction should be combined with technology, strong employment practices, and appropriate organizational support.

10.7.6 Reform Destination Governance and Establish Measurable Accountability

Effective governance is required to connect cultural policy, tourism development, infrastructure, environmental management, transportation, education, public health, and community development. Thailand should strengthen coordination among national agencies, provincial and local governments, destination-management organizations, communities, businesses, universities, and civil-society groups.

Destination-management organizations should be established or strengthened in major tourism areas and emerging destinations. These organizations should possess clear

responsibilities, professional personnel, stable funding, access to reliable data, and formal mechanisms for community participation. Their responsibilities should include strategic planning, visitor management, crisis preparedness, destination maintenance, stakeholder coordination, and performance monitoring.

Long-term policy should also address regulatory fragmentation involving land use, short-term accommodation platforms, professional licensing, tourist safety, wellness and medical tourism, environmental standards, cultural ownership, taxation, data protection, and consumer rights. Policy coherence is essential because promotional success cannot compensate for weak destination management or inconsistent regulation.

Performance measurement should move beyond arrivals and total tourism receipts. The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism provides an internationally agreed basis for integrating economic, social, and environmental indicators into tourism measurement (UN Tourism, 2024). Thailand should extend this framework to include cultural vitality and governance indicators, such as:

- locally retained tourism income and quality employment;
- resident well-being and participation in decision-making;
- the condition of heritage resources and cultural landscapes;
- the number and continuity of cultural practitioners;
- youth participation in cultural transmission;

- water, energy, waste, emissions, and biodiversity performance;
- visitor satisfaction, accessibility, and perceived authenticity;
- crisis preparedness and destination-management capacity.

Results should be publicly reported at national and destination levels. Independent evaluation would improve accountability and reduce the risk that concepts such as *high-value tourism*, *community benefit*, *sustainability*, and *regeneration* are used without evidence of measurable outcomes.

10.7.7 Integrate Tourism, Creative Industries, and Soft Power

Thailand should continue strengthening its soft-power strategy through closer integration of tourism, culture, education, gastronomy, wellness, sport, film, music, fashion, design, and digital media. Cultural and creative industries generate economic value, employment, international visibility, and new channels through which countries communicate their identities. The Creative Economy Outlook 2024 identifies digitalization, artificial intelligence, competition, and sustainability as important forces shaping the future of creative industries (UNCTAD, 2024).

Soft-power policy should not be limited to promotional exposure or the global popularity of cultural products. It should strengthen the ecosystems that enable creators, communities,

practitioners, and cultural enterprises to produce and retain value. This requires financial support, professional development, intellectual-property protection, international distribution, cultural research, and collaboration among tourism organizations and creative industries.

Thailand's international tourism brand should reflect the diversity of its regions and communities rather than relying on a narrow set of familiar cultural images. Destination branding should be supported by authentic experiences, credible standards, community benefit, safety, accessibility, and environmental responsibility. Thailand's current *Value over Volume* direction offers a foundation for connecting wellness, gastronomy, creative communities, events, and sustainable tourism with quality-led growth (TAT, 2025; TAT, 2026).

At last, the purpose of soft power should not be merely to increase tourist arrivals. It should strengthen cultural confidence, create opportunities for Thai practitioners and enterprises, encourage intercultural understanding, and generate long-term relationships between Thailand and international audiences.

10.8 Book Conclusion

Tourism in the twenty-first century is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Models centred primarily on visitor growth, infrastructure expansion, and destination promotion are increasingly being reconsidered in favour of approaches that pursue more balanced economic, social, cultural, and environmental outcomes. Contemporary tourism policy places growing emphasis on resilience, sustainability, inclusion, experience quality, technological adaptation, and community well-being rather than measuring success through arrivals and receipts alone (OECD, 2026; UN Tourism, 2024).

Within this changing environment, culture has emerged as one of the most significant resources available to tourism destinations. Culture is no longer regarded merely as a supplementary attraction or a symbolic representation of identity. Heritage, traditions, knowledge, creativity, cuisine, wellness practices, festivals, artistic expressions, and community lifestyles can contribute directly to destination differentiation, entrepreneurship, employment, social cohesion, visitor experience, and international visibility. UNESCO's recognition of culture as a global public good further emphasizes its central role in human-centred and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022).

This book has developed Cultural Capital Tourism Management as an integrated approach to understanding how cultural resources can contribute to tourism development while remaining connected to the communities, values, and knowledge systems from which they originate. Drawing upon cultural

capital theory, cultural economics, destination management, experience design, creative tourism, sustainability, and soft power, the book has demonstrated that culture generates multiple forms of value. Its contribution extends beyond direct tourism expenditure to include cultural identity, social relationships, knowledge transmission, creativity, destination reputation, and community resilience.

A central argument of the book is that cultural capital must be managed as a strategic but vulnerable asset. Cultural resources do not automatically generate positive tourism outcomes. Heritage buildings may deteriorate, cultural landscapes may be transformed, traditional skills may disappear, and cultural practices may lose their meanings when they are disconnected from their communities or excessively adapted to market demand. At the same time, rigid approaches that attempt to preserve culture in an unchanging form may prevent living traditions from responding to contemporary circumstances.

Effective cultural capital management therefore requires a continuous relationship between preservation and adaptation. Cultural resources must be documented and protected, but they must also be practised, interpreted, transmitted, and creatively renewed. Cultural capital may be potentially regenerative when tourism revenue, community participation, education, and innovation are reinvested in the people, institutions, places, and practices that sustain it. Without such reinvestment, tourism may consume cultural value more rapidly than communities can reproduce it.

Identification provides the foundation by revealing the tangible and intangible resources embedded within destinations. Preservation protects their physical condition, cultural meaning, ownership, and continuity. Activation connects cultural resources with interpretation, storytelling, experience design, entrepreneurship, and appropriate technologies. Value creation generates economic, social, cultural, experiential, and symbolic benefits. Sustainability and regeneration ensure that part of this value is returned to cultural practitioners, communities, heritage conservation, environmental stewardship, and future generations.

These functions should not be treated as a simple linear sequence. They form a continuing management cycle. Tourism activation may reveal previously overlooked cultural resources; visitor interpretation may create new educational opportunities; cultural entrepreneurship may finance preservation; and community participation may redefine what should be safeguarded or shared. Cultural Capital Tourism Management is therefore an adaptive process that must respond continuously to changing cultural contexts, community aspirations, market conditions, and environmental pressures.

Thailand provides a particularly compelling context in which to examine this relationship. The country's tourism identity has been shaped by the interaction of natural environments with Buddhist traditions, historic cities, religious architecture, performing arts, crafts, festivals, regional cuisines, Thai massage, herbal knowledge, hospitality, creative industries, and diverse community lifestyles. These cultural resources contribute to the distinctiveness of Thailand's tourism

experiences and to the wider international visibility of the country.

Thailand's current movement toward value-oriented tourism reinforces the relevance of this approach. Recent national tourism directions emphasize quality, balance, sustainability, regional distribution, meaningful experiences, wellness, gastronomy, creative communities, and the principle of *Value over Volume*. These directions indicate a growing recognition that long-term competitiveness cannot depend exclusively on increasing visitor numbers; it must also depend on the quality of value created for destinations and society (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2025, 2026).

Nevertheless, Thailand's cultural richness should not be interpreted as an unlimited tourism resource. Culture remains embedded in particular people, places, beliefs, relationships, and ways of life. When cultural assets are separated from these contexts, they may be simplified into standardized products that provide limited benefits to their communities of origin. Communities must therefore be recognized not only as tourism stakeholders but also as custodians, practitioners, creators, and rights holders. Their participation is essential in determining what cultural knowledge may be shared, how it should be interpreted, and how tourism benefits should be distributed.

The discussions throughout the book have consequently emphasized that community participation must extend beyond symbolic consultation. Communities should possess meaningful influence over tourism planning, cultural representation, experience development, visitor management, and benefit

sharing. Cultural practitioners should receive appropriate recognition and remuneration, while younger generations should be provided with opportunities to learn, adapt, and continue cultural knowledge. Tourism becomes culturally sustainable only when it contributes to the continuity and well-being of the communities that sustain its cultural foundations.

The future of cultural tourism will also depend on the ability to balance technological innovation with human and cultural integrity. Artificial intelligence, smart-tourism systems, virtual reality, augmented reality, digital archives, and immersive storytelling can expand access, improve interpretation, support conservation, and enhance destination management. Digitalization is also reshaping the wider cultural and creative economy by creating new production and distribution opportunities, although it raises concerns about inequality, intellectual property, cultural diversity, privacy, and market concentration (UNCTAD, 2024).

Technology should therefore support rather than displace cultural practitioners, local knowledge, human hospitality, and direct engagement with places. An AI-generated narrative cannot independently determine the cultural significance of a ritual, and a virtual heritage environment cannot entirely reproduce the sensory, social, and emotional qualities of encountering culture in its original context. Digital innovation creates the greatest value when it improves accessibility and understanding while remaining accountable to the people and cultures being represented.

Preservation and innovation should not be considered opposing objectives. Cultural innovation can strengthen continuity by enabling traditions to remain relevant to contemporary society. Traditional textiles may be connected with sustainable design, culinary heritage may support new gastronomic experiences, and community histories may be communicated through film, exhibitions, or digital storytelling. The experience economy further demonstrates that tourism value increasingly emerges through participation, learning, emotional engagement, and memorable encounters rather than through passive consumption alone (Pine & Gilmore, 2019).

However, cultural innovation must remain grounded in cultural knowledge and community participation. Innovation that merely extracts visual motifs, traditional knowledge, or community stories for commercial use may generate market attention without strengthening cultural vitality. Responsible innovation should preserve cultural ownership, provide fair recognition, and create opportunities for practitioners and communities to participate in the value generated.

The book has also highlighted the transition from sustainable toward regenerative tourism. Sustainability remains essential because tourism must reduce emissions, conserve resources, manage visitor pressures, protect heritage, and distribute benefits more fairly. Regenerative tourism extends this objective by asking whether tourism can actively improve the places and systems in which it operates. It emphasizes community capability, cultural revitalization, ecosystem

restoration, place-based development, and net-positive outcomes (Bellato et al., 2023).

From a cultural-capital perspective, regeneration involves more than preserving existing cultural objects. It requires strengthening the capacity of communities to continue creating culture. Tourism can contribute by supporting cultural education, artisan livelihoods, local languages, traditional food systems, heritage maintenance, creative enterprises, intergenerational learning, and community-controlled cultural initiatives. The long-term objective is not simply to prevent cultural loss but to establish conditions in which culture can remain meaningful and flourish.

Another major contribution of the book is its interpretation of tourism as a channel of soft power. Soft power is generated through attraction, credibility, values, and voluntary identification rather than through coercion (Nye, 2004). Tourism enables visitors to encounter a country's culture directly through its people, food, heritage, everyday life, landscapes, creative expressions, and hospitality. These encounters can influence destination image and international perceptions long after a journey has ended.

The Thai Soft Power Tourism Model proposed in this book explains how cultural capital can be interpreted and creatively transformed into tourism experiences that generate interconnected outcomes. These include visitor value, local economic benefits, destination competitiveness, cultural sustainability, national reputation, and international influence. The model also emphasizes that soft power cannot be produced

through promotion alone. Cultural attraction must be supported by credible experiences, public trust, cultural integrity, service quality, institutional capacity, and the ways visitors are treated within the destination.

Tourism measurement must consequently evolve alongside tourism development. International arrivals and total expenditure remain useful indicators, but they provide an incomplete understanding of destination performance. The international Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism represents an important step toward integrating tourism's economic, social, and environmental dimensions (UN Tourism, 2024). Thailand and other culturally rich destinations should further incorporate indicators relating to cultural vitality, community participation, local income retention, resident well-being, cultural transmission, heritage condition, and regenerative outcomes.

For policymakers and destination managers, the implications are clear. Culture should occupy a central position in tourism planning rather than being treated as decorative content for marketing campaigns. Investment in cultural preservation, creative industries, community capabilities, cultural entrepreneurship, human capital, and responsible innovation should be understood as long-term investment in destination resilience. Governance systems must connect tourism with cultural policy, environmental management, education, transportation, public health, digital regulation, and community development.

For tourism businesses, cultural capital creates opportunities to develop distinctive and meaningful experiences, but it also establishes responsibilities. Businesses should collaborate with communities and cultural practitioners, represent cultural knowledge accurately, compensate contributors fairly, reduce environmental pressures, and reinvest in the resources upon which their products depend. Authenticity cannot be produced by marketing alone; it must be reflected in relationships, practices, and the distribution of value.

For researchers, Cultural Capital Tourism Management provides a broad agenda for future inquiry. Further research is needed to examine how cultural capital is identified and valued, how benefits are distributed, how communities negotiate preservation and innovation, how digital technologies influence cultural representation, and how cultural sustainability and regeneration can be measured. Comparative studies may also examine how the framework operates across different destinations, cultural systems, and governance contexts.

Eventually, the future of tourism will not be determined solely by technological capability, infrastructure investment, market growth, or promotional visibility. It will also be shaped by the ability of destinations to understand what makes them distinctive, protect what communities consider meaningful, and create respectful connections between visitors and local cultures.

The case of Thailand demonstrates that cultural capital is far more than a collection of tourism attractions. It is a living national asset composed of knowledge, identity, creativity, memory, relationships, and practice. When effectively managed,

it can contribute simultaneously to meaningful visitor experiences, local livelihoods, cultural continuity, community resilience, destination competitiveness, and international influence.

Cultural Capital Tourism Management therefore offers more than a framework for utilizing culture in tourism. It provides a framework for ensuring that tourism serves culture as much as culture serves tourism. The long-term success of Thailand and other culturally rich destinations will depend on maintaining this reciprocal relationship. Tourism should not merely consume the cultural qualities that make places distinctive; it should contribute to their preservation, renewal, and flourishing. In this sense, the future of tourism and the future of cultural capital are inseparable.

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May we never simply preserve culture for the future, but give future generations every reason to *love it, live it, and carry it* forward.

”

Chayapoj Lee-Anant &

Kulvadee Lamaijeen

"The greatest journey is not toward a destination, but toward a deeper understanding of who we are, what we value, and what we choose to pass on."

"The journey ends here, but culture continues—lived by people, carried through stories, and reimagined for generations yet to come."

Chayapoj Lee-Anant &

Kulvadee Lamaijeen