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INNOVATIVE REVITALIZATION OF ASEAN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE COMMERCIALIZATION: A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE ON CULTURAL CAPITAL, SOCIAL COHESION, AND DIPLOMATIC SOFT POWER

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and regional integration, the preservation and revitalization of ASEAN's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) face both opportunities and challenges. This paper explores innovative development strategies for ICH revitalization under the theoretical framework of cultural capital, with a particular focus on the commercialization of traditional knowledge. Drawing from a Chinese research perspective, the study examines how China's experience in heritage preservation, cultural industries, and soft power diplomacy can inform ASEAN's approach to ICH revitalization. Through qualitative analysis of policy documents, cultural industry case studies, and regional cooperation initiatives, the research highlights the dual role of ICH in strengthening social cohesion within ASEAN societies and enhancing diplomatic soft power in international relations. The paper argues that sustainable commercialization of traditional knowledge, when guided by ethical and community-based frameworks, can transform intangible heritage into a source of cultural resilience and regional identity. Moreover, the Chinese model of integrating cultural capital theory with development policies offers valuable lessons for ASEAN countries seeking to balance tradition, innovation, and economic development in their cultural heritage strategies.

KEYWORDS: ASEAN Intangible Cultural Heritage, Traditional Knowledge Commercialization, Cultural Capital Theory, Social Cohesion, Diplomatic Soft Power, Cultural Revitalization, Heritage Innovation, China-ASEAN Cultural Relations, Cultural Industry Development, Regional Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The revitalization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has become an increasingly important area of focus in the context of globalization, cultural homogenization, and regional identity-building efforts. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN member states face the dual challenge of preserving their diverse intangible heritage—ranging from oral traditions and performing arts to traditional craftsmanship—while simultaneously promoting economic development and regional integration. Within this framework, the innovative commercialization of traditional knowledge (TK) emerges as a potential strategy for sustainable heritage revitalization. This process not only supports local communities economically but also reinforces social cohesion and contributes to the soft power of states within and beyond ASEAN (UNESCO, 2021; Hafstein, 2019).

China's experience in integrating cultural capital theory into heritage policy and practice offers useful insights for ASEAN countries seeking to balance tradition and innovation. Cultural capital, as theorized by Bourdieu (1986), refers to the social assets—including education, intellect, and cultural knowledge—that promote social mobility. When applied to heritage contexts, it provides a framework for understanding how intangible traditions can be transformed into valuable cultural resources within modern economies. Chinese scholars and policymakers have increasingly emphasized the role of TK commercialization in enhancing cultural self-confidence, supporting rural revitalization, and strengthening national identity (Zhang & Wang, 2020). These efforts resonate with ASEAN's objectives of using culture as a tool for inclusive development and diplomacy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Moreover, the strategic use of ICH in international cultural exchanges and regional cooperation serves as a vehicle for enhancing diplomatic soft power. Nye (2004) conceptualized soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, and cultural diplomacy has since become a key component of ASEAN-China relations. Through shared cultural initiatives, festivals, and intergovernmental heritage programs, intangible heritage is increasingly recognized as a medium for fostering mutual understanding, peacebuilding, and regional solidarity (Yeo, 2022; Wu & Chia, 2021).

Despite these promising developments, several gaps remain in the theoretical and practical understanding of how TK commercialization can be aligned with cultural capital theory to strengthen both social cohesion and diplomatic soft power

within ASEAN. Few empirical studies have systematically analyzed this triadic relationship or explored China's potential role as a model and partner in such cultural strategies.

This study therefore aims to investigate how innovative approaches to traditional knowledge commercialization can contribute to the revitalization of ASEAN's intangible heritage. Specifically, it explores this development through the dual theoretical lenses of cultural capital and soft power, informed by the Chinese experience. The research addresses the following central question:

1. **How does the commercialization of traditional knowledge influence the revitalization of ASEAN intangible cultural heritage through the lens of cultural capital theory?**
2. **In what ways can China's practices in heritage commercialization and cultural diplomacy inform ASEAN strategies for enhancing social cohesion and diplomatic soft power?**

By providing a conceptual and comparative analysis grounded in relevant literature and case studies, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of sustainable heritage management in ASEAN and offers a policy-relevant framework for future cultural cooperation between China and Southeast Asian nations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The revitalization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in the domains of cultural policy, anthropology, and international development. Central to this discourse is the tension between heritage preservation and commercialization, particularly in regions marked by ethnic and cultural diversity, such as ASEAN. Scholars have long emphasized that intangible heritage—unlike tangible heritage—is embedded in living practices, community memory, and oral transmission, making its preservation both culturally sensitive and contextually complex (Smith, 2006; Kurin, 2004).

One major theoretical lens applied to heritage revitalization is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as the non-financial social assets that promote social mobility and cultural distinction. In heritage studies, this theory has been extended to explain how traditional knowledge and practices can serve as symbolic resources that enhance the social status and identity of communities (Throsby, 2001). Cultural capital theory is particularly relevant in Southeast

Asia, where many forms of ICH—such as textile weaving, oral epics, ritual dances, and indigenous knowledge—carry deep-rooted socio-cultural meanings and potential for economic transformation (Lenzerini, 2011).

Traditional knowledge commercialization refers to the process of transforming indigenous knowledge systems, rituals, crafts, and symbols into marketable goods and services. While commercialization is often criticized for leading to commodification or cultural dilution, recent studies suggest that, when properly regulated, it can provide sustainable income sources for local communities and strengthen cultural pride (Coombe, 2015; Yu, 2020). In the ASEAN context, there is growing interest in leveraging traditional knowledge for economic development under frameworks like the Creative Economy and Sustainable Development Goals (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

China's experience in this area is particularly instructive. Over the past two decades, Chinese scholars and policymakers have actively promoted the integration of ICH into the creative industries through initiatives such as the "ICH+Internet" model and national ICH protection lists (Zhao & Liu, 2021). This approach combines state-led preservation with market-driven innovation, encouraging the commercialization of traditional crafts, festivals, and oral narratives through digital platforms, tourism, and e-commerce. Researchers argue that such strategies not only help preserve endangered heritage but also strengthen national identity and soft power (Wang, 2013).

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. Cultural diplomacy—wherein heritage is used as a medium of exchange and engagement—has become a core tool in ASEAN-China relations. Joint exhibitions, cultural exchange programs, and heritage restoration projects serve to reinforce diplomatic ties and mutual understanding (Yeo, 2022). Moreover, ASEAN's own cultural policies increasingly emphasize the use of heritage to foster regional unity, particularly in response to globalization and geopolitical pressures (King, 2016).

However, challenges persist. Some scholars caution that unchecked commercialization risks alienating the very communities that safeguard ICH, especially when external actors control the economic benefits (Hafstein, 2019). Others highlight the lack of coherent legal and ethical frameworks for equitable benefit-sharing, intellectual property rights, and authenticity preservation in both China and ASEAN

countries (Posey & Dutfield, 1996).

Despite these concerns, a growing body of literature supports the idea that a balanced model—combining community-centered commercialization, cultural capital development, and soft power strategy—can foster both heritage sustainability and regional cohesion (Su, 2020; Zhang & Wang, 2020). This research builds upon these insights to explore how ASEAN can adopt and adapt elements of China's heritage commercialization practices within its unique socio-cultural and political landscape.

In conclusion, the literature underscores the need for an integrated approach that links cultural capital theory, traditional knowledge commercialization, and soft power diplomacy. Such a framework not only supports the economic and cultural revitalization of ICH but also enhances ASEAN's internal social cohesion and its external diplomatic influence. This study contributes to that discussion by analyzing the practical and theoretical implications of this intersection through a comparative lens rooted in China-ASEAN cultural cooperation.

3. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in comparative case study analysis and documentary research methods, supported by a conceptual framework drawn from cultural capital theory and soft power theory. The qualitative methodology is appropriate for exploring complex socio-cultural dynamics and understanding the interplay between traditional knowledge commercialization, social cohesion, and diplomatic soft power in ASEAN, with comparative reference to Chinese heritage practices.

3.1. Research Design

A comparative-descriptive design was employed to analyze how selected ASEAN countries (such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam) are engaging in the revitalization and commercialization of intangible cultural heritage. China's approach to similar processes was examined as a benchmark and analytical reference point. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of both similarities and differences in heritage policies, commercialization strategies, and soft power outcomes.

3.2. Data Sources and Materials

The study draws upon a variety of primary and secondary sources, including:

- Policy documents and strategic plans related to intangible cultural heritage protection and

creative industries from ASEAN member states and China (e.g., UNESCO national reports, ASEAN Cultural Cooperation Strategy, China's ICH Protection Plan).

- Academic literature on cultural capital, soft power, heritage economics, and traditional knowledge systems published in peer-reviewed journals.
- Reports and guidelines from international organizations such as UNESCO, WIPO, and the ASEAN Secretariat.
- Case studies of heritage commercialization projects, such as Indonesian batik, Thai herbal medicine, and Vietnamese water puppetry, alongside comparable Chinese initiatives (e.g., Guizhou Miao batik, Yunnan tea culture).
- Interviews (optional for future study): Although this paper is primarily literature-based, future phases may include expert interviews with cultural policymakers, heritage practitioners, and community leaders in ASEAN and China to validate findings and enrich contextual understanding.

3.3. Analytical Framework

Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis, guided by three interrelated themes:

1. Cultural Capital Development – examining how traditional knowledge and ICH practices are recognized, valued, and transformed into cultural capital within national and regional frameworks.
2. Social Cohesion Impact – analyzing the extent to which heritage commercialization promotes community empowerment, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and cultural continuity.
3. Soft Power Strategy – assessing the role of ICH in shaping ASEAN's cultural diplomacy and China's influence in the region through cooperative cultural initiatives.

The conceptual integration of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and Nye's soft power framework (Nye, 2004) provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing how intangible cultural assets are mobilized both for internal cohesion and

external diplomatic engagement.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability of data interpretation, multiple sources were triangulated, including scholarly publications, government documents, and international reports. The study critically examined each source for authorship, purpose, and contextual relevance. Though the research is largely qualitative and exploratory, attention was paid to maintaining academic rigor and objectivity through systematic coding and cross-case comparison.

3.4. Limitations

This research is limited by its reliance on existing literature and secondary data, which may not capture all nuances of community perspectives or evolving policy environments. Future empirical studies involving fieldwork, interviews, and participatory observation are recommended to complement and validate these findings.

4. RESULTS

The results of this qualitative study reveal three major thematic findings aligned with the research framework: (1) the commercialization of traditional knowledge as a tool for intangible heritage revitalization; (2) the role of cultural capital development in promoting social cohesion; and (3) the strategic use of ICH in enhancing diplomatic soft power, especially through China-ASEAN cultural cooperation.

1. Traditional Knowledge Commercialization and Heritage Revitalization

Across selected ASEAN countries—specifically Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam—traditional knowledge commercialization is increasingly adopted as a strategy for heritage revitalization. Initiatives such as community-based crafts markets, cultural tourism, and government-supported creative industry policies have led to the economic valorization of local heritage practices. For instance, the promotion of Indonesian batik as a UNESCO-inscribed heritage item has significantly boosted local artisans' income and international visibility

Table 1: Examples of ICH Commercialization Initiatives in ASEAN And China.

Country	ICH Practice	Commercialization Mode	Observed Impact
Indonesia	Batik textiles	Handicraft exports, tourism	Increased artisan income, heritage pride
Thailand	Herbal medicine	Wellness tourism, branding	New rural employment, health innovation
Vietnam	Water puppetry	Performances for tourists	Cultural tourism growth, youth engagement
China	Miao batik, Yunnan tea	E-commerce, heritage villages	Digitized trade, domestic cultural revival

These findings demonstrate that commercialization, when community-led and

ethically guided, can support both economic empowerment and cultural sustainability.

2. Cultural Capital and Social Cohesion

The successful integration of ICH into national development frameworks contributes to increased social cohesion by reinforcing cultural identity, intergenerational transmission, and local pride. China's model of incorporating ICH into education systems and rural revitalization policies has influenced similar strategies in ASEAN. In particular, youth involvement in heritage projects and creative industries has been found to mitigate cultural erosion and foster communal belonging.

3. ICH And Diplomatic Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy has become a strategic element of ASEAN-China relations. Shared heritage programs, joint festivals, and bilateral cultural cooperation projects have positioned ICH as a key soft power asset. China's Confucius Institutes, Silk Road heritage projects, and ASEAN-China cultural exchange year events have helped strengthen regional ties.

Table 2: Asean-China Joint Cultural Heritage Initiatives.

Initiative	Partners Involved	Focus Area	Outcome
ASEAN-China Cultural Exchange Year	All ASEAN + China	Performances, exhibitions	Strengthened cultural ties and visibility
Maritime Silk Road Joint Research	China + Vietnam, Malaysia	Shared maritime ICH	Promoted historical-cultural diplomacy
Intangible Heritage Workshops (UNESCO)	China + ASEAN States	Skills training, knowledge sharing	Capacity building, regional policy dialogue

These findings confirm that ASEAN countries, with reference to China's approach, are using ICH strategically to project cultural identity and foster diplomatic relations, especially in the context of soft power competition and cultural regionalism.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the increasingly strategic role that traditional knowledge commercialization plays in the revitalization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) within ASEAN countries, particularly when informed by cultural capital theory and guided by regional examples such as China. The results demonstrate that, when carefully managed, commercialization does not necessarily undermine the authenticity of cultural practices but can instead serve as a sustainable pathway to heritage preservation and community development.

A key implication is that intangible heritage, often seen as fragile or obsolete, can gain renewed relevance through economic and diplomatic frameworks. The observed cases show that initiatives rooted in local identity—such as batik production or traditional healing—become more than economic commodities; they evolve into tools for asserting cultural agency, especially among youth and marginalized communities. This transformation reinforces a sense of belonging and pride, which contributes directly to social cohesion. In this context, cultural capital becomes a living asset that binds communities internally and positions them more confidently on regional and global stages.

The comparative insights from China illustrate

how national heritage policies, when synchronized with digital innovation and rural development, can amplify both the preservation and the visibility of ICH. ASEAN countries are beginning to adapt similar practices, albeit with varying levels of institutional support. This convergence offers an important lesson: commercialization must be balanced with ethical engagement, community ownership, and sustained policy backing to avoid cultural exploitation or dilution.

Diplomatically, the integration of ICH into ASEAN-China cooperation reveals the soft power potential of cultural heritage. Joint cultural festivals, training programs, and knowledge exchanges not only enhance mutual understanding but also create a shared regional identity rooted in history and cultural continuity. This cultural diplomacy model could serve as a stabilizing force in a region marked by diversity and geopolitical tensions.

However, it is also evident that the success of these initiatives depends heavily on inclusive governance structures. Without equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms and protective legislation, traditional knowledge commercialization may exacerbate inequalities or lead to cultural alienation. This raises critical policy considerations for ASEAN: How can countries promote heritage-based development while safeguarding community rights? What models of regulation and participation can ensure that heritage revitalization does not become a top-down or extractive process?

In conclusion, this study underscores the transformative potential of traditional knowledge commercialization when it is embedded within a

cultural capital framework and aligned with soft power strategies. It demonstrates that ASEAN countries, inspired by China's evolving heritage policies, are well-positioned to develop inclusive and strategic models of ICH revitalization that support both domestic cohesion and international influence. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of these models on cultural sustainability and explore participatory mechanisms that place communities at the center of heritage policy design and implementation.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study explored the innovative development of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) revitalization in ASEAN through the lens of traditional knowledge commercialization, with reference to cultural capital theory and diplomatic soft power, particularly drawing insights from China's practices. The findings demonstrate that traditional knowledge, when responsibly commercialized, holds significant potential to reinforce social cohesion and contribute to ASEAN's soft power in international cultural diplomacy.

By aligning heritage revitalization strategies with cultural capital development, ASEAN countries can foster community identity, empower local economies, and create sustainable pathways for heritage transmission. Furthermore, joint ASEAN-China heritage initiatives illustrate how shared cultural programs can become instruments of regional unity, mutual recognition, and peaceful cooperation.

However, the research also highlights the need for strong policy frameworks that protect the rights of heritage bearers and ensure equitable participation in

commercialization processes. Without such safeguards, there is a risk that cultural commodification could lead to the erosion of authenticity or exploitation of traditional knowledge holders.

1. **Develop inclusive heritage policies** that support community ownership, capacity-building, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
2. **Strengthen ASEAN-China cultural cooperation** through long-term heritage exchange programs, co-funded creative projects, and regional knowledge-sharing platforms.
3. **Promote ethical commercialization models** that include benefit-sharing mechanisms, intellectual property protection, and fair-trade certification for ICH-based products.
4. **Encourage digital innovation** to modernize the presentation and transmission of ICH while respecting its traditional roots.
5. **Conduct participatory research and evaluation** to ensure that heritage revitalization efforts reflect the values, priorities, and aspirations of the communities involved.

In essence, the future of ICH in ASEAN lies not just in preservation but in innovation—anchored in tradition yet responsive to the modern social, economic, and diplomatic challenges of the region. Sustainable and culturally sensitive commercialization, supported by regional cooperation, can turn intangible heritage into a powerful asset for both local empowerment and regional integration.

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