

The Road to Intangible Cultural Heritage: Promoting Thailand's Dacheng Historical Site Park

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Abstract

As a world cultural heritage site, the Dacheng Historical Site Park in Thailand not only reflects Thailand's glorious history and religious culture, but also has important significance in the protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage. This article takes "The Road to Intangible Cultural Heritage" as the core theme, starting from the historical background and cultural value of the Dacheng Site, and analyzes the specific practices and achievements in promoting intangible cultural heritage, including policy support, digital technology application, and international cultural exchange. At the same time, it pointed out issues such as commercialization tendency, insufficient dissemination depth, and discontinuity in intangible cultural heritage inheritance. The article ultimately proposes three strategic directions: building a "cultural ecological chain", "IPization of intangible cultural heritage", and "international cultural window", to promote the Dacheng site as an important node for global intangible cultural heritage dissemination.

Keywords

Intangible Cultural Heritage; Thailand; Dacheng Historical Site Park; Cultural promotion; World Heritage Site; cultural ecology.

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH") stands as a crucial and irreplaceable component of human civilization. It serves as a living repository, meticulously safeguarding the unique cultural memory and profound wisdom of specific regional groups. These cultural legacies, passed down through generations, encapsulate the collective experiences, values, and beliefs of communities, offering invaluable insights into their historical trajectories and social structures. For instance, traditional storytelling in indigenous communities not only entertains but also imparts moral lessons, historical knowledge, and survival skills, acting as a vital educational tool. Moreover, ICH vividly embodies the rich tapestry of cultural diversity and the boundless creativity of humanity. It showcases the remarkable variety of human expressions, from the intricate melodies of traditional music to the elaborate choreography of folk dances, and the meticulous craftsmanship of artisanal handicrafts. Each form of intangible cultural heritage is a unique manifestation of a community's identity, reflecting its distinct aesthetic sensibilities, spiritual beliefs, and cultural traditions. This diversity enriches the global cultural landscape, fostering mutual understanding, respect, and appreciation among different cultures. However, against the backdrop of rapid globalization and the profound changes in modern lifestyles, intangible cultural heritage is confronted with a multitude of formidable challenges. The loss of cultural heritage is a pressing issue, as many traditional practices and knowledge systems are at risk of disappearing due to factors such as urbanization, migration, and the decline of traditional livelihoods. Younger generations, influenced by modern consumer culture and the allure of new

technologies, often show less interest in learning and preserving traditional cultural practices, leading to a break in the transmission chain. Dating, another significant challenge, refers to the difficulty of accurately documenting and verifying the origins and historical development of intangible cultural heritage. Unlike tangible heritage, which can be physically examined and dated through scientific methods, intangible cultural heritage exists in oral traditions, performances, and practices, making it more challenging to establish a precise timeline. This lack of proper documentation can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and the loss of important cultural context. Commercialization also poses a threat to the authenticity and integrity of intangible cultural heritage. In the pursuit of economic benefits, some cultural practices and traditions may be commodified and distorted, losing their original meaning and significance. For example, traditional festivals may be transformed into commercial spectacles, with the focus shifted from cultural celebration to profit-making, diluting the cultural essence of the events.

Given these challenges, the question of how to achieve effective dissemination and sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage on the basis of protection has emerged as the core issue of cultural heritage management. This requires a comprehensive approach that combines legal protection, community engagement, education, and innovation. Ayutthaya Historical Park, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, serves as a remarkable example of how cultural heritage can be effectively preserved and disseminated. It is not merely a physical site that showcases the grandeur of ancient Thai architecture and the depth of Buddhist culture but also an active and vibrant platform for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. Within the park, a rich array of cultural activities takes place, breathing life into the intangible cultural heritage. During traditional festivals, such as the Songkran Festival (Thai New Year) and Loy Krathong Festival (Festival of Lights), the park comes alive with colorful parades, traditional music and dance performances, and religious ceremonies. These events not only attract tourists from around the world but also provide a platform for local communities to showcase and celebrate their cultural traditions, reinforcing a sense of cultural identity and pride. Religious ceremonies held at the temples within the park offer a glimpse into the spiritual beliefs and practices of Thai Buddhism. Monks chanting sutras, devotees making offerings, and the intricate rituals associated with Buddhist festivals are all integral parts of the intangible cultural heritage. These ceremonies not only play a crucial role in maintaining the religious and cultural traditions but also serve as a means of cultural exchange, allowing visitors to gain a deeper understanding of Thai Buddhism.

Folk crafts are another important aspect of the intangible cultural heritage at Ayutthaya Historical Park. Skilled artisans demonstrate traditional handicraft techniques, such as silk weaving, wood carving, and pottery making. Visitors have the opportunity to learn these crafts firsthand, engaging in hands-on experiences that not only preserve the traditional skills but also promote cultural tourism. By interacting with the artisans and purchasing their products, tourists contribute to the economic viability of these traditional crafts, ensuring their continued existence. Dance performances, with their graceful movements and elaborate costumes, are a visual feast that showcases the beauty and elegance of Thai culture. Traditional Thai dance forms, such as the Khon dance (masked dance drama) and the Ramwong dance (circle dance), are performed regularly at the park. These performances not only entertain the audience but also convey important cultural stories, values, and historical events, acting as a powerful medium for cultural dissemination.

2. Overview of Dacheng Historical Site Park

2.1 Historical background and development context. The Ayutthaya Dynasty (1350 - 1767), often regarded as the golden age of Thai history, was once the political, religious, and cultural

heart of Thailand, boasting a glorious and eventful history that spanned over four hundred years. At its zenith, the city of Ayutthaya was a bustling metropolis with a population exceeding one million, firmly establishing itself as one of the most vibrant and populous cities in the world at that time. Strategically positioned along the Maritime Silk Road, Ayutthaya's significance as a major trading hub was unparalleled. Its ports welcomed a constant stream of ships laden with goods from far - flung regions. Merchants from China, with their silk, porcelain, and tea; Persians, known for their precious gemstones and spices; as well as those from Portugal and France, all flocked to this thriving city. They settled, built communities, and engaged in lively trade, creating a unique and dynamic pattern of multicultural integration. In the city's markets, the sounds of different languages mingled, and the aromas of diverse cuisines filled the air. Chinese traders set up shops selling their exquisite handicrafts, while Persian merchants displayed their luxurious textiles. This cultural exchange was not limited to commerce; it also extended to the realms of art, religion, and technology. For instance, Chinese architectural elements began to influence local construction, and Persian artistic motifs found their way into Thai decorative arts. However, in 1767, the dynasty's fortunes took a tragic turn. Under the fierce invasion of Burma, the once - mighty city was laid waste. The Burmese army, with their superior military strength, sacked the city, leaving behind a scene of utter devastation. Palaces that once housed the royal family and witnessed grand ceremonies were reduced to rubble, and magnificent temples that had been the spiritual centers of the city were destroyed. The once - bustling streets were filled with debris, and the air was thick with the smell of burning. Despite the destruction, the remnants of the past still hold a certain allure. The remaining Buddhist pagodas, with their weathered facades, stand as silent witnesses to the city's former glory. The murals, though faded and damaged, still depict scenes from Buddhist mythology and the daily life of the people in vivid detail. Stone carvings, with their intricate patterns and sculptures, continue to fascinate visitors with their craftsmanship. In 1987, recognizing the historical and cultural significance of the site, the Thai government launched a comprehensive and systematic restoration project. Teams of archaeologists, historians, and restoration experts worked tirelessly to uncover the buried treasures of the past, piece by piece. They painstakingly restored the damaged structures, using traditional techniques and materials to ensure authenticity. In 1991, their efforts were recognized when UNESCO officially listed the Ayutthaya Historical Park as a World Cultural Heritage site. Since then, Ayutthaya has transformed. It has become not only a top - tier cultural tourism destination in Thailand, attracting millions of visitors from around the globe each year, but also a vital platform for the dissemination and education of intangible cultural heritage.[1] Tourists come to marvel at the ancient ruins, but they also have the opportunity to engage with and learn about the rich intangible cultural heritage that is still alive and well in the area.

2.2 Cultural Value and Artistic Characteristics The architecture of the Ayutthaya site is a remarkable testament to the city's history of cultural exchange and integration. It seamlessly blends the styles of Khmer, Sri Lankan, and southern Indian architectures, giving rise to a unique form of architectural art that harmoniously combines a strong local religious spirit with international elements. The Chedi, one of the most iconic architectural features in Ayutthaya, with its characteristic bell - shaped structure, is not merely a physical building but a profound symbol. It represents the Buddhist cosmology, embodying the concept of the universe in Buddhist beliefs. Rising majestically from the ground, the Chedi's shape is said to symbolize the journey of the soul towards enlightenment. The intricate carvings and decorations on its surface often depict Buddhist stories and symbols, serving as a visual teaching tool for the faithful.

Buddhist rituals are another important aspect of the intangible cultural heritage. Around Wat Mahatthath, one of the most famous temples in Ayutthaya, villagers continue to follow age - old traditions. They painstakingly make incense burners and offering boxes in the traditional way,

using natural materials and traditional designs. During festivals, the temple comes alive with activity. People gather in their finest traditional costumes, participating in elaborate worship ceremonies. The air is filled with the sound of chanting, the smell of incense, and the sight of colorful processions. These rituals not only strengthen the community's religious beliefs but also create a sense of unity and shared identity. Royal dances, with their graceful and elaborate movements, are a living art form that has been preserved in Ayutthaya. Passed down from the royal courts of the past, these dances tell stories from Thai history and mythology. The dancers, dressed in resplendent traditional costumes, perform with precision and elegance, their movements accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of traditional Thai music. These performances are not only a form of entertainment but also a means of transmitting cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next.[2]

The traditional costumes worn by the locals are a visual feast. Rich in color and intricate in design, they reflect the social status, region, and cultural traditions of the wearer. Each costume is a work of art, with elaborate embroidery, beautiful patterns, and precious embellishments. When people wear these costumes during festivals and ceremonies, they are not only dressed in beautiful clothing but also embodying the cultural heritage of Ayutthaya.[3] All these intangible cultural heritage elements come together to make the Ayutthaya site more than just a collection of ancient ruins; it is a living, breathing cultural space, a "living culture" that can be seen, touched, and experienced.

3. The Integration of the "Road to Intangible Cultural Heritage" and the Dacheng Site

3.1 The Ayutthaya Site transcends the boundaries of a mere historical relic; it stands as a vibrant, living platform that fosters cultural inheritance and drives innovation. During significant festivals like the Thai New Year, known as the Songkran Festival, and Loy Krathong, the site transforms into a bustling hub of cultural activity. In the lead-up to Songkran, the air in the Ayutthaya Site area is charged with anticipation. The grounds are adorned with colorful banners and traditional Thai decorations. Buddhist donations are organized, with visitors lining up to offer alms to monks, a practice deeply rooted in Thai Buddhism that symbolizes respect and the pursuit of merit. Prayer ceremonies are held in the ancient temples, where the rhythmic chanting of monks echoes through the ruins, creating a serene and spiritual atmosphere. Traditional dance performances take center stage, with dancers in elaborate costumes gracefully moving to the beat of traditional Thai music. The Ramakien dance, inspired by the epic Thai version of the Ramayana, captivates audiences with its dramatic storytelling and intricate choreography. Palace costume parades add a touch of grandeur, as participants don ornate royal attire, recreating the splendor of the Ayutthaya Dynasty. These events draw thousands of tourists from both within Thailand and around the world, all eager to immerse themselves in the rich cultural tapestry on display. The concept of "on-site experience" at the Ayutthaya Site is a powerful tool for cultural dissemination. Tourists are not passive observers; instead, they are actively engaged participants. When it comes to activities like praying for water lanterns during Loy Krathong, tourists are guided through the process by local experts. They learn the significance behind each step, from crafting the krathong (the small, decorated floating basket) using natural materials like banana leaves and flowers, to making wishes as they release their lanterns onto the water. The act of physically creating and releasing the lanterns evokes a sense of connection to the local culture and traditions. In the Thai weaving workshops, tourists sit side by side with master weavers, learning the intricate techniques passed down through generations. They carefully select colorful threads, following the weavers' instructions to create their own small pieces of fabric. Through these hands-on experiences, tourists not only gain a deeper understanding of historical events but also develop

an emotional resonance with the intangible cultural heritage. The 2023 "Traditional Clothing Week" event in Ayutthaya was a resounding success. The ancient city ruins were transformed into a runway of sorts, with models showcasing a wide range of traditional Thai clothing, from the elegant chut thai, often worn on formal occasions, to the more casual sinh, a traditional skirt. The event attracted approximately 80,000 tourists. Among them, foreign tourists were particularly enthusiastic. Many donned Thai-style sarongs, which they purchased at the event or from local vendors. They roamed the ancient ruins, taking countless photos, their smiles beaming as they posed against the backdrop of the historical site. These photos were then shared on social media platforms, reaching a global audience. Hashtags related to the event trended worldwide, with captions expressing awe at the beauty of Thai culture and the grandeur of the Ayutthaya Site. This not only increased the visibility of the site but also significantly enhanced the international dissemination of Thai culture, acting as a digital bridge that connected Ayutthaya to the world.

3.2 The integrated development of experiential cultural tourism In recent years, Ayutthaya Park has been at the forefront of the experiential cultural tourism movement, making significant strides in integrating intangible cultural heritage elements into its offerings. The development of specialized courses is a prime example of this initiative. Thai-style Dim sum making courses are designed to introduce tourists to the unique flavors and techniques of Thai cuisine. In these classes, led by local chefs, participants learn to prepare traditional Thai snacks like khanom buang, delicate crispy pancakes filled with sweet or savory ingredients. The Buddha sculpture experience courses offer a deeper dive into the art and spirituality of Thailand. Tourists are provided with blocks of clay or stone and guided by skilled sculptors to create their own small Buddha statues. They learn about the different postures and expressions of Buddha, as well as the symbolic meaning behind each element of the sculpture.[4] Court dance introductory courses are another highlight, where participants get to learn the basic steps and movements of traditional Thai court dances. The instructors not only teach the physical choreography but also share the historical and cultural context of the dances, bringing the ancient royal court to life. These courses have proven to be highly popular, attracting a diverse range of educational groups, including school students on cultural exchange trips, and passionate cultural lovers from all over the world.

4. The Current Status and Strategies of Promoting the Dacheng Site

4.1 Policy support and multi-party collaboration The Thai Ministry of Culture released the "National Cultural Heritage Development Strategy (2020-2030)" in 2020, which clearly proposes the strategic direction of "taking heritage sites as the core, linking communities, temples, and schools to jointly build cultural circles". In Dacheng, the government collaborates with local village committees, Buddhist temples, schools, and tourism organizations to plan intangible cultural heritage festivals, support craft training and traditional skill recording projects, and promote the transformation of traditional villages into "cultural and creative villages". For example, the "Wat Chaiwatthanaram Community Arts Program" is funded by the government for local youth to learn court dance and regularly perform at the site, which not only enhances their identification with local culture but also attracts a large number of tourists to stop and watch.

4.2 Digital Technology and Multilingual Communication The Dacheng Site actively introduces emerging technologies such as AR guided tours, virtual reconstruction, and digital museums. The "Virtual Ancient City" project, developed in collaboration with Chulalongkorn University, allows tourists to scan the ruins through a mobile app and see a 3D restored view of the former palace, greatly enhancing the educational function and interactive experience. In addition, through platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, the "One Minute Intangible Cultural Heritage"

and "Ancient Capital Stories" series of programs are launched in the form of short videos, documentaries, etc., covering multilingual audiences and enhancing cultural output. For example, an English short film showcasing the forging techniques of ancient Buddhist statues received over 2 million views within six months, becoming a new model for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage.

4.3 International Cooperation and Academic Exchange Dacheng actively participates in cooperation with international organizations such as UNESCO and the Asia Pacific Cultural Center. It regularly holds events such as the "Asian Ancient Capital Culture Week" and the "Thailand World Heritage Forum", inviting scholars, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and young people from multiple countries to participate in cultural interaction. Establishing a "World Ancient Capital Friendship and Cooperation Mechanism" with Xi'an, China and Nara, Japan, for exchanges in temple protection, festival reconstruction, cultural research, and other aspects, has enhanced the discourse power of Dacheng in the global cultural heritage system.[5]

5. Existing Problems and Challenges

5.1 Excessive commercialization leads to cultural distortion In order to attract tourists, some intangible cultural heritage display projects have shown a tendency towards entertainment. Some traditional dances have been adapted into popular elements, losing their original sense of religious ceremony; The "ancient costume experience" merchant mixes Chinese, Japanese, and Korean clothing, leading tourists to misunderstand the traditional Thai clothing system. This phenomenon is particularly prominent during the peak of festival tourism, affecting the sacredness of archaeological sites and the deep cultural dissemination of intangible cultural heritage.

5.2 Single dissemination content and weak education system At present, the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage in major cities mainly focuses on "surface culture" such as dance, festivals, and cuisine, while the dissemination of "deep intangible cultural heritage" such as Buddhist philosophy, traditional ethics, and handicraft aesthetics is insufficient. Tourists often browse through intangible cultural heritage in a hurried manner, lacking a systematic understanding of it. The lack of heritage courses in primary and secondary schools and uneven training of tour guides have led to serious problems of distortion and superficiality in the dissemination process.

5.3 Fault in the inheritance of traditional skills Some important crafts, such as palace brocade weaving, colored pottery firing, and Buddha statue gilding, are facing the dilemma of "the decline of old artists and the lack of successors". Young people have low interest in traditional skills, and the existing support mechanisms are mostly short-term subsidies, lacking institutionalized apprenticeship systems, career promotion mechanisms, and market transformation channels, resulting in insufficient momentum for the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

6. Future Prospects: Building A Cultural Brand of "Road to Intangible Cultural Heritage"

6.1 Building a heritage based cultural ecosystem Taking the Dacheng site as the core, radiating to surrounding communities, Buddhist temples, workshops, and schools, creating an "intangible cultural heritage village belt" and forming a cultural ecology of industry education community linkage. For example, establishing "Heritage Schools" and "Craft Workshops" to support the incubation of intangible cultural heritage IP, youth inheritor programs, and study tour products, enhancing the system's inheritance capabilities.

6.2 Promote the "IPization" of intangible cultural heritage and industrial integration Develop cultural and creative products, film and television works, digital art, and game content based on historical figures, legends, Buddhist images, etc., to achieve contemporary expression of cultural values. By utilizing new media such as NFTs (non fungible tokens) and digital collectibles, establish a digital asset library for intangible cultural heritage and attract young users to participate.

6.3 Expand the functions of international communication and cultural diplomacy Relying on the "the Belt and Road" cultural channel, take the big city as the forefront of cultural transmission in Southeast Asia, set up "Thailand Intangible Cultural Heritage Experience Hall" in Europe and East Asia, plan international tours and cultural co creation activities, enhance soft power and international influence, and truly build the big city as a model portal of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Road".

7. Conclusion

As a composite cultural site that seamlessly integrates material heritage and intangible cultural heritage, the Ayutthaya Historical Site Park in Thailand has embarked on a distinctive journey along the "Road to Intangible Cultural Heritage," aiming to promote the revitalization and widespread dissemination of its heritage while simultaneously contributing to the construction of cultural soft power.

In terms of policy support, the Thai government has played a pivotal role. It has formulated a series of targeted policies specifically tailored to the development of the Ayutthaya Historical Site Park. For instance, tax incentives have been provided to enterprises and individuals involved in the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage within the park. This encourages local artisans, cultural institutions, and tourism - related businesses to actively participate in heritage - related activities. Financial subsidies are also allocated for research projects focused on the intangible cultural heritage of Ayutthaya, such as studies on traditional handicraft techniques, oral traditions, and cultural rituals. The pressure exerted by modern tourism is one of the most pressing issues. With the increasing number of tourists visiting Ayutthaya, there is a growing strain on the site's infrastructure and environment. The large influx of visitors leads to overcrowding, which can cause damage to the ancient ruins and disrupt the traditional way of life of the local community. There are also concerns about the commercialization of cultural heritage, as some tourism - related activities may prioritize profit - making over cultural authenticity, diluting the value of the intangible cultural heritage. The loss of traditional culture is another serious threat. As younger generations are increasingly influenced by modern lifestyles and globalized cultures, there is a decline in their interest in learning and preserving traditional cultural practices. Many traditional handicraft techniques are at risk of being , as there are fewer young people willing to spend the time and effort to master these skills. Oral traditions, such as local folk stories and legends, are also in danger of fading away as the elders who carry this knowledge pass on. To address these challenges, continuous efforts are required. In terms of ecological construction, sustainable tourism practices need to be implemented. This includes limiting the number of daily visitors, developing eco - friendly transportation options within the park, and implementing waste management systems to minimize the environmental impact. The education system should be reformed to incorporate more content related to intangible cultural heritage. Schools in the area can offer courses on traditional handicrafts, cultural rituals, and local history, inspiring the younger generation to take pride in their cultural heritage and actively participate in its preservation. In the realm of cultural creativity, more innovative products and experiences should be developed. For example, combining traditional cultural elements with modern design concepts to create unique handicrafts, souvenirs, and cultural performances that appeal to a

wider audience, especially younger consumers. Only by taking these comprehensive measures can Ayutthaya truly transform from a "site protection area" to a "global cultural dialogue platform." It has the potential to become a benchmark for promoting the dissemination and innovation of world intangible cultural heritage, setting an example for other historical sites around the world on how to balance heritage protection, cultural promotion, and sustainable development.

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