

Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage (Including digital trends for culture)

**ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Trend Report
No. 25 (2026)**

ASCC Research & Development Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts



one vision
one identity
one community



ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Trend Report

ASCC Research and Development Platforms Programme

The ASEAN Secretariat
Jakarta

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967. Its Member States are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

The ASEAN Secretariat is based in Jakarta, Indonesia.

For inquiries, contact:

The ASEAN Secretariat

Community Relations Division (CRD)

70A Jalan Sisingamangaraja

Jakarta 12110 Indonesia

Phone: (6221) 724-3372, 726-2991

Fax: (6221) 739-8234, 724-3504

Email: public@asean.org

Catalogue-in-Publication Data

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Trend Report

Jakarta

ASEAN Secretariat

Classification Number

363.7

1. ASEAN - ASCC - Media, Culture, Arts

ISSN: 2986-4224

Vol. 25

ASEAN: A Community of Opportunities for All

The text of this publication may be freely quoted or reprinted, provided proper acknowledgement is given and a copy containing the reprinted material is sent to the CRD of the ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta.

General information on ASEAN appears online at the ASEAN website www.asean.org.

© ASEAN 2026. All rights reserved.



This trend report was made possible with the support of:
ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund

Editorial Committee of the ASCC Research and Development Platforms Programme

Advisor:	Dr. Kao Kim Hourn , <i>Secretary-General of ASEAN</i>
Chairperson:	San Lwin , <i>Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community</i>
Members:	Rodora T. Babaran , <i>Director of Human Development Directorate</i> Ky-Anh Nguyen , <i>Director of Sustainable Development Directorate</i> Kamal Mamat , <i>Head of Education, Youth and Sports Division</i> Jennifer E. dela Rosa , <i>Head of Health Division</i> Mega Irena , <i>Head of Labour and Civil Service Division</i> Miguel Musngi , <i>Head of Poverty Eradication and Gender Division</i> Jonathan Tan Ghee Tiong , <i>Head of Culture and Information Division</i> Riyanti Djalante , <i>Head of Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance Division</i> Vong Sok , <i>Head of Environment Division</i>
Managing Editor:	Puthsodary Tat , <i>Head of ASCC Monitoring Division</i>
Associate Editor:	Erica Paula Sioson , <i>Senior Officer of ASCC Analysis Division</i>
Production Editors:	Ratnawati Kusuma Jaya & Karina Oriza Herastuti , <i>Officers of ASCC Analysis Division</i>

This report is a publication of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department of the ASEAN Secretariat. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of ASEAN, ASEAN Member States, the ASEAN Secretariat, or ASEAN Dialogue Partners. For more information about the ASCC Research and Development Platforms Programme contact the ASCC Analysis Division at ASCCAD@asean.org.

Table of Contents

<u>Table of Contents</u>	6
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	8
<u>Executive Summary</u>	10
<u>Section 1: Introduction</u>	11
1. Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	11
2. Defining Cultural Heritage and Its Potential	11
3. Considerations in the Preservation and Protection of Cultural Heritage	11
<u>Section 2: ASEAN Cooperation on Cultural Heritage Preservation and Promotion</u>	13
1. ASEAN Laws, Policies, and Mechanisms	13
2. Analysis	13
<u>Section 3: Trends, Challenges, and Recommendations</u>	15
1. Changing Focus on Intangible Heritage	15
2. Homogenisation of Cultural Heritage	16
3. Enhancing Economic Growth through Cultural Heritage: Balancing Preservation and Development	16
3.1 Loss of Cultural Heritage	17
3.2 Rapid Urbanisation	18
3.3 Climate Change	19
3.4 Digital Transformation: Accessibility, Cultural, and Ethical Considerations	19
3.5 Cultural Dialogue and Diversity through Inclusive Governance	20
4. Repatriation of Cultural Objects	21
5. International Cooperation	21
<u>Section 4: Case Studies and Best Practices</u>	23
1. Cultural Diplomacy and Peacebuilding	23
2. Cultural Initiatives for Social Cohesion and Exchange	23
3. Connecting Artisans to Networks	24
4. Revitalising Traditional Craft Villages	24
5. Integrating Historical Sites into Urban Design	24

6. Community-Based Heritage Initiatives	25
7. Relocation that Respects Cultural Needs	25
8. Climate Change and Cultural Heritage	26
9. Repatriation of Cultural Objects	26
<u>Section 5. Conclusion</u>	27
<u>References</u>	28

Acknowledgements

The ASCC Research and Development Platforms Programme is the proactive response of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASSC) to analyse, understand, and formulate strategic responses to multifaceted challenges in the region. ASCC's R&D Platforms focus on diverse sectors crucial to the socio-cultural fabric of the ASEAN Community, with the media, culture, and arts, as one such focus.

The ASCC R&D Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts aims to develop a robust body of research outputs and identify and develop a pool of experts more aware of the ASEAN context. Its primary objective is to incorporate external perspectives to foster an increased awareness of blind spots, identify gaps and trends, and facilitate policy and advocacy engagement on cross-sectoral issues. The ASCC R&D Platform on Media, Culture, and Art received support from the Government of People's Republic of China Through the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund (ACCF).

This report, as part of the ASCC Research and Development (R&D) Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts, aims to provide a strategic space for dialogue on emerging and cross-cutting issues in ASEAN. In particular, it highlights key challenges and trends that are likely to shape the post-2025 landscape; these include, among others, digital transformation for media industry, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, ASEAN Creative Economy, and ASEAN Identity.

This report was made possible by the technical expertise and knowledge shared by many individuals and organisations, whom we thank here:

- The Senior Officials Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA), the Senior Officials' Meeting Responsible for Information and Media (SOMRI), and the Senior Officials Committee for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (SOCA), for their guidance and insights;
- The ASEAN Secretariat, under the leadership of H.E. San Lwin, the Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC); Dr. Puthsodary Tat, Head of the ASCC Monitoring Division; the ASCC Analysis Division comprising Dr. Erica Paula Sioson, Ms. Ratnawati Kusuma Jaya, Ms. Karina Oriza Herastuti; and the Culture and Information Division, in particular, Dr. Jonathan Tan, Ms. Mary Anne M. Luis, Dr. Noel Hidalgo Tan, Ms. Fiori Rizki Djuwita, Ms. Widya Librianti, and Ms. Armita Soetarto, for their feedback, support, and facilitation during the development of this publication;
- Former Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for the ASCC, H.E. Ekkhaphab Phanthavong for his direction during the implementation of the ASCC R&D Platforms Programme; Dr. Benjamin Loh, former Head of the ASCC Monitoring Division, for his strategic implementation guidance and oversight and Ms. Pricilia Putri Nirmala Sari, Ms. Rebekha Adriana, and Ms. Hizky Kezia Ambroise Sufa; former members of ASCC Analysis Division for their facilitation and support;
- Dr. Teh Lip Li and Ms. Amalia Hayati;
- Mr. Christian Razukas for copyediting.

We invite readers to engage with the findings and analysis presented in this publication. We believe this research offers valuable insights for business, educators, individuals, policymakers, and practitioners alike, as we collectively navigate media, culture, and arts in ASEAN.

Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Trend Report No. 25 (2026)

ASCC Research and Development Platform on Media, Culture, and Arts

Dr. Teh Lip Li

Executive Summary

This report investigates some trends, challenges, and opportunities in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage across the ASEAN region. It begins by defining cultural heritage in the ASEAN context and exploring key considerations in its preservation and promotion.

The report provides the context of ASEAN cooperation on cultural heritage and regional initiatives. It then delves into significant trends and provides recommendations for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage. These include a shifting focus towards intangible cultural heritage and the challenge of balancing economic growth with heritage preservation.

The report addresses critical issues such as the loss of cultural heritage, rapid urbanisation, climate change on heritage sites. It explores the role of digital transformation in heritage preservation, discussing accessibility, cultural, and ethical considerations. The report also examines the effect of non-Southeast Asian cultural content and heritage in the region, and the complexities of international cooperation in heritage preservation efforts.

Through case studies, the report illustrates various approaches to heritage preservation and promotion. These include cultural initiatives for peace building, programs connecting artisans to global markets, efforts to revitalise traditional craft villages, the integration of historical sites into urban design, community-based heritage initiatives, culturally sensitive relocation projects, and devising strategies to address climate change.

The sections explore the implications in pursuing economic growth through creative industries while acknowledging the need for sustainable and culturally sensitive development, as well as the contribution of cultural initiatives to regional peace. The sections emphasise the importance of community involvement, the preservation of intangible heritage, and the need for strategies to address environmental and technological changes.

The report calls for a context-sensitive approach to cultural heritage promotion and protection in Southeast Asia. It underscores the need for policies and practices that balance economic development with cultural preservation, empower local communities, and respect the dynamic nature of cultural heritage. By addressing these complex issues, ASEAN can ensure that cultural heritage remains a vibrant, inclusive, and economically viable aspect of the region's identity and development.

Section 1 introduces the topic of the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, and defines the report's objectives, scope, and methodology. It provides definitions and considerations on preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. Section 2 provides the context for ASEAN cooperation. Section 3 investigates trends, defines challenges, and offers recommendations. Section 4 offers some case studies and examples, while Section 5 provides a conclusion.

Section 1: Introduction

1. Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This trend report provides an overview of key trends in how ASEAN and the member states have promoted and protected cultural heritage, focusing on regional and intergovernmental activities that fall under the sectoral bodies of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The report does not offer in-depth analyses of specific industries of the creative economy.

The report aims to stimulate thought and inform the future actions of ASEAN governments and their stakeholders, including research institutions, non-governmental organisations, specialist bodies, and practitioners. While ASEAN policies emphasise the economic potential of the creative industries and the importance of cultural preservation, a separate trend report explores development of ASEAN's creative economy.

The report employs qualitative methodological approaches, including content, descriptive, comparative and gap analyses. These methods are applied to academic and policy documents, discussions from conferences and forums, and informal interviews with academics, experts, and cultural practitioners.

2 Defining Cultural Heritage and Its Potential

Cultural heritage encompasses tangible and intangible elements that represent a society's collective identity, history, and values. UNESCO (2003) defines cultural heritage as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, and associated cultural spaces recognised as such by communities. This aligns with scholarly perspectives that view cultural heritage as a dynamic process of meaning-making and value attribution (Smith, 2006).

The preservation and promotion of cultural heritage can foster social cohesion and peace in diverse regions. Shared heritage can also build a bridge between communities, promoting mutual understanding and respect. Digital archives and the cross-border accessibility of cultural heritage can potentially reduce inter-communal tensions (Chong, 2020).

However, the mismanagement or neglect of cultural heritage can lead to increased social tensions and conflict. Disputes over cultural heritage can exacerbate ethnic or religious divisions. Inclusive heritage policies that recognise tangible and intangible heritage aim to mitigate these risks by ensuring that diverse cultural expressions are valued and protected.

The concept of cultural heritage has evolved to include industrial heritage, cultural landscapes, and urban centres, reflecting a holistic approach that recognises the role of cultural heritage in sustainable development and community well-being (Harrison, 2013). This expanded understanding aligns with global trends that consider heritage as a resource for sustainable development and social cohesion.

3. Considerations in the Preservation and Protection

Culture encompasses the shared beliefs, practices, values, and symbols that shape a community's social life. Tangible expressions of culture include artefacts, monuments, and built environments, while intangible elements encompass traditions, beliefs, languages, and knowledge systems passed down through generations.

This diversity involves dynamic interactions between shared heritage and individual agency that is shaped by historical, social, and geographical contexts (Logan, 2012).

Cultural heritage connects the present to the past, shapes identities, and fosters intercultural dialogue. It is dynamic and contested, grappling with issues of representation, access, and community engagement. Effective preservation and promotion of cultural heritage require a sensitive approach that acknowledges the complexities of heritage and the diverse voices shaping it (Winter, 2014).

The conventional focus on monuments and other tangible artefacts is limiting. Equal weight should be given to intangible heritage --traditions, languages, and social practices. This requires a shift from top-down efforts to collaborative projects that empower local communities to shape their cultural legacy. Community initiatives can involve residents in documenting traditional knowledge, conducting archaeological digs, or developing respectful and economically beneficial heritage tourism programs (Henderson, 2012).

Constructing a singular narrative for cultural heritage is problematic. Heritage sites often become curated experiences, presented through a dominant lens that neglects the experience of marginalised groups. This can distort history, and increase exclusion. Promoting a more inclusive understanding of heritage requires acknowledging contested histories and embracing diverse perspectives. Such efforts can be made by developing interactive public programs, that incorporate multiple narratives, and encourage critical dialogue (Byrne, 2014).

While safeguarding cultural heritage can ensure its transmission to future generations, promotion can produce dilemmas and commodification. Efforts to make cultural heritage more widely known can lead to exploitation for tourism or the creation of a sanitised versions of the culture for public consumption. The commercialisation of traditions can contribute to the denial, recasting, or erosion of their original contexts and significance. Homogenisation can occur, with dominant cultural expressions overshadowing minority voices.

Promoting cultural heritage should involve collaboration with the communities that shape these traditions, ensure that narratives are shaped by those who have knowledge in order to avoid inauthentic representations. Further, focusing on creating sustainable tourism practices and intercultural dialogues can boost popular understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage.

By embracing these complexities and fostering a collaborative approach, ASEAN can help ensure that the protection of AMS cultural heritage is a dynamic and inclusive process, that helps people learn from the past, strengthens communities, supports stories that remain relevant and accessible for future generations, and fosters intercultural understanding.

Section 2: ASEAN Cooperation on Cultural Heritage Preservation and Promotion

1. ASEAN Laws, Policies, and Mechanisms

ASEAN's approach to regional cooperation on cultural heritage preservation and promotion complements global efforts under the UNESCO frameworks. The ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (2000) provides an inclusive definition of heritage and advocated for cooperation in conservation, documentation, and public awareness (ASEAN, 2000; King, 2016).

The ASEAN Charter (2007) established a broader framework for regional cooperation, implicitly acknowledging the role of cultural heritage by delineating the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) as one of ASEAN's three Pillars (ASEAN, 2007a). The ASCC Blueprint 2016-2025 further operationalised these aspirations, outlining strategic objectives for cultural cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016a). Building on this foundation, the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025 emphasises safeguarding and promoting cultural heritage to strengthen regional identity and foster socio-economic development, emphasising the role of cultural and creative industries in economic development (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Further, the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (2007) provides limited coverage of cultural rights. While it acknowledges the dignity of migrant workers which could imply respect for cultural identity, it does not explicitly address cultural traditions, language rights, religious accommodation and cultural integration. The Declaration embeds cultural rights in broader provisions ensuring 'fair and appropriate treatment' despite ASEAN's cultural diversity and significant intra-regional migration flows (ASEAN, 2007b).

This legal and policy framework provides the basis for joint efforts to safeguard cultural heritage in ASEAN. It reflects an evolving understanding that encompasses preservation and dynamic engagement with contemporary socio-economic realities (Taylor & Lennon, 2011).

2. Analysis

ASEAN's approach has attracted both praise and criticism. Commendable efforts include the establishment of the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (2000) and the adoption of the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025, which aim to foster regional identity and promote cultural diversity (ASEAN Secretariat, 2018). Initiatives like the ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive have improved accessibility to the region's cultural artefacts (Chong, 2020).

However, these efforts face several limitations, including:

1. Prioritisation of economic development over cultural conservation, contributing to the neglect or destruction of significant sites (Henderson, 2012; King, 2016).
2. Lack cohesion and implementation of cultural policies across member states
3. an absence of robust, regional preservation laws and policies. Policies like the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage are non-binding, limiting national implementation.
4. Limited resources and expertise at the ASEAN Secretariat to monitor and ensure compliance.
5. Diverse cultural heritage across the member states complicates development of standardised approaches and policies.
6. Insufficient public awareness and participation in cultural heritage conservation efforts.
7. Absence of a regional cultural heritage fund and limited cross-border cooperation on preservation projects (Hitchcock et al, 2010).

The challenges highlight the need for stronger institutional mechanisms, increased funding, and greater public engagement. These institutional challenges manifest in various ways across different aspects of cultural heritage protection, including managing urbanisation, repatriating heritage objects, and fostering international cooperation. Future efforts should focus on enhancing cross-country mobility and connections, long-term cooperation, and balancing economic development with cultural conservation. Fostering public awareness and participation is also crucial.

Section 3: Trends, Challenges, and Recommendations

Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible provides a basis for identity, social cohesion, and increasingly, economic growth. Efforts to protect and promote heritage are gaining momentum worldwide and across Southeast Asia, driven by its significance in promoting economic and social protection. Several trends shape the preservation and protection of cultural heritage across the region.

1. Changing Focus on Intangible Heritage

The field of cultural heritage preservation and promotion has evolved in recent decades, challenging traditional paradigms and broadening the understanding of heritage. Historically, conservation centred on tangible heritage, particularly monuments and archaeological sites. This approach, rooted in Western concepts, prioritised preservation of structures and material artefacts deemed historically or aesthetically significant (Smith, 2006).

This emphasis on monuments often results in a top-down, expert-driven approach to conservation. The value and meaning of heritage were predominantly determined by technical professionals and state institutions, potentially privileging certain narratives of national identity and history at the expense of diverse, local, and marginalised heritage (Winter, 2014). Across Southeast Asia, this trend manifests in a focus on ancient temples, colonial buildings, and other monumental structures that are portrayed as representing national identity and national grandeur.

However, this focus on tangible heritage fails to capture the full spectrum of cultural expressions and lived experiences. Moreover, emphasising physical preservation risked disconnecting heritage sites from their social and cultural contexts and transforming them into static monuments rather than evolving cultural spaces (Byrne, 2014).

In recent years, greater awareness and a more inclusive understanding of cultural heritage have emerged. This shift places greater emphases on identity and recognising that heritage encompasses a range of practices, knowledge systems, and expressions beyond physical artefacts or structures. Intangible cultural heritage has been acknowledged as an important part of shaping and maintaining cultural identity given globalisation and rapid social change. It is how communities express their worldviews, values, and collective memories.

The preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage, including traditional knowledge, languages, and performing arts, are crucial for maintaining cultural continuity and social cohesion. However, cultural practices may inadvertently be frozen in preservation efforts that ignore the dynamic and evolving nature of intangible heritage (Bendix, 2009).

Across Southeast Asia, with its ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, intangible heritage is particularly significant as it is often connected to local ecological knowledge and sustainable practices that contribute to cultural and environmental sustainability (Hitchcock et al., 2010). Further, discussions on identity in heritage

discourse raise important questions about power, representation, and the right to define cultural significance. This question of whose identity is represented or preserved is as important as who is being marginalised or excluded.

Protecting intangible heritage presents unique challenges in terms of documentation, transmission, and safeguarding. Unlike tangible heritage, which can be physically conserved, the long-term viability of intangible heritage relies on active individual practitioners as well as intergenerational transmission. This requires a shift from preservation-focused approaches to dynamic, community-centred strategies to support the continued practice and evolution of cultural traditions.

Further, a growing emphasis on identity and intangible heritage has implications for its management and policy. It calls for more participatory, inclusive approaches that recognise communities as the primary stakeholders in their heritage. Practitioners and policymakers must develop new methodologies and frameworks to support and protect the diverse forms of intangible heritage across the region.

2. Homogenisation of Cultural Heritage

Globalisation and standardised preservation practices have helped to homogenise cultural heritage, posing a significant challenge to the diversity and authenticity of cultural heritage across the region. The homogenisation of cultural heritage can manifest in various ways, for example, in how international organisations set criteria for recognition. UNESCO's World Heritage List has been criticised for encouraging a standardised approach to a nation's presentation of its cultural heritage, leading to cases where local distinctiveness has been diminished to meet global standards. Tourism also contributes to this trend. Cultural commodification for tourist consumption often results in simplified or easily accessible versions of complex practices and sites. Living cultures with complex traditions may be reduced to static displays or performances (Hitchcock et al., 2010).

Moreover, the dominance of Western management approaches to global heritage can inadvertently lead to the marginalisation of local and indigenous approaches to heritage management (Smith, 2006). Western methodologies often prioritise material authenticity over the continuity of traditional practices and living heritage.

More culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches to heritage preservation are needed to recognise the diverse ways that heritage is conceived and valued across cultures and embracing more pluralistic understandings of cultural significance (Winter, 2014). Measures to address this concern include developing localised heritage management strategies that prioritise community values and practices, encouraging the integration of traditional knowledge systems in conservation, promoting cultural diversity in heritage tourism, emphasising unique local narratives, and fostering regional cooperation to develop context-specific approaches to heritage preservation.

3. Enhancing Economic Growth through Cultural Heritage: Balancing Preservation and Development

The appreciation of the economic potential of cultural heritage is growing across Southeast Asia. Many countries are now incorporating heritage conservation into their economic development strategies, with cultural tourism initiatives at the forefront of this approach.

In Singapore, historic areas such as Boat Quay and Clarke Quay have been revitalised and turned into thriving commercial and tourism centres (Henderson, 2012). The preservation of the ancient town of Hoi An, Viet Nam, has turned it into a major tourist attraction and driver of local economic development (Tuan, T. H., & Duc, T. A., 2019). Cambodia's management of the Angkor Archaeological Park has created substantial employment and business opportunities for nearby communities.

The development of markets for cultural products is crucial for this economic strategy. Southeast Asia boasts a rich array of traditional crafts, textiles, and artisanal goods that could be traded in domestic and international markets. However, these products face challenges in maintaining quality and accessing markets. Some countries have addressed those issues. Thailand's One Tambon One Product programme (Pawakapan, 2015), and other initiatives support emerging creative economies with product development, branding, and marketing expertise. The rise of digital platforms and e-commerce has also opened new avenues for artisans and cultural producers to reach global audiences.

The performing arts sector, meanwhile, faces difficulties in attracting and retaining audiences in an increasingly globalised and digital world. These events contribute to the local economy and help preserve and promote intangible cultural heritage. Developing sustainable audiences requires a comprehensive and integrated approach, including supporting arts education, community engagement programmes, and innovative marketing strategies to appeal to diverse audiences while respecting traditional art forms.

However, the commercialisation of heritage and heritage sites raises concerns about authenticity and the potential displacement of local communities. While UNESCO World Heritage status has brought economic benefits to many sites, it can also lead to gentrification and the displacement of long-time residents. Moreover, the commercialisation of cultural items risks altering or diminishing their original meaning and significance.

Sustainable heritage tourism requires careful management to ensure that economic gains do not compromise cultural values or community well-being. This involves regulating visitor numbers, ensuring fair distribution of economic benefits, maintaining the authenticity of cultural practices and sites, involving local communities in decision making, and implementing adaptive reuse strategies that respect historical integrity while meeting modern needs.

The ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025 (ASEAN, 2016) is a collective effort to address these challenges. It promotes cultural heritage as a foundation for sustainable development while emphasising the importance of community engagement and cultural diversity.

As AMS continue to leverage their rich cultural heritage for economic growth, they will need to develop policies and practices to ensure the long-term viability of cultural assets and related communities. This may involve innovative financing mechanisms, such as heritage funds or public-private partnerships, or capacity-building initiatives to equip local communities with the skills needed to sustainably manage and benefit from cultural resources.

3.1 Loss of Cultural Heritage

Heritage is more than mere physical preservation, economic development, a set of material objects or sites. It is a cultural process of meaning-making and identity formation (Smith, 2006). The threats to cultural heritage in the region must be understood within broader socio-political issues.

The interaction of globalisation and local heritage across Southeast Asia highlights power dynamics that often privilege certain narratives over others. The focus on monuments like Angkor Wat or Borobudur can overshadow less spectacular but still important representations of local heritage (Winter, 2014). Selective preservation, often driven by tourism and economic interests, risks elevating heritage concepts that may not align with local cultural values or lived experiences.

Climate change also poses a significant threat to tangible heritage, but its impact extends beyond physical damage. Climate change can disrupt the cultural landscape and traditional practices intrinsically linked to heritage sites (Markham et al, 2016). For instance, changes in agricultural patterns due to altered climate conditions could affect the cultural significance of sites like the rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras.

Participatory approaches can fail to address underlying inequalities in heritage management (Waterton and Smith, 2010). Community-based conservation efforts, while valuable, must ensure that local stakeholders are genuinely empowered rather than reinforce existing power structures.

The loss of cultural diversity is not merely a passive result of globalisation but often an active consequence of political and economic decisions. The homogenisation of cultural practices and marginalisation of minority traditions can reinforce dominant cultural narratives.

The decline of cultural practices, including traditional crafts and the performing arts, in the region involves a loss of skills and an erosion of diverse ways of knowing, being, and interacting with the environment. Intangible heritage is not just about preserving the past but about sustaining living cultures. The challenge lies in finding ways to keep these traditions relevant and viable in contemporary contexts without reducing them to spectacles for economic gain or tourist consumption.

Moreover, the emphasis on particular ‘unique’ or ‘authentic’ traditions can inadvertently deny the natural evolution that all human cultures experience. Heritage conservation must recognise that culture is dynamic and allow for innovation and adaptation within traditional practices (Silverman, 2015).

3.2 Rapid Urbanisation

The expansion of development projects, driven by infrastructure expansion and urban renewal, can lead to the displacement of communities, the demolition of historical sites, and the erosion of intangible cultural practices like indigenous languages, artisanal crafts, and storytelling traditions. Tourism can also lead to overcrowding, cultural commodification, and environmental degradation.

It is important to prioritise responsible practices and find a balance between development, progress, and the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional practices. This requires consideration of cultural values, local community involvement, and consideration of their needs. Balancing urban planning with heritage conservation involves creative solutions like integrating historical sites into urban design, providing opportunities for relocation that respect cultural needs (ICOMOS, 2017), and prioritising sustainable development practices to minimise environmental impact.

As communities develop, traditional practices like fishing or farming compete with new technologies or economic pressures. Efforts should be made to find ways to adapt to new developments while safeguarding cultural knowledge and ensuring equitable benefits for communities. Further, rapid social change and the dominance of international languages can threaten the survival of indigenous languages and traditional knowledge systems. Measures to prevent their decline and extinction include programmes to revive languages, community-based documentation initiatives, and the integration of traditional knowledge into educational systems.

Navigating these complexities requires multiple coordinated approaches. Institutional mechanisms must be established for meaningful engagement with stakeholders at all stages of heritage-making. The empowerment of local communities in decision-making will ensure that their voices are heard and their needs are met. Thorough and inclusive impact assessments of heritage in development projects will allow for proactive mitigation strategies to minimise negative consequences.

Development and modernisation efforts must be sensitive to cultural values and traditions, and incorporate local knowledge and practices when possible. For example, traditional architectural techniques can enhance modern building designs while creating unique, culturally-rich urban spaces. Embracing sustainable development will ensure that progress meets current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs and ensure that cultural heritage remains a resource for present and future communities.

While it is challenging to balance between development and preservation, ASEAN can safeguard the sustainability of its rich cultural heritage by acknowledging these complexities, prioritising community participation, and adopting sensitive development approaches.

3.3 Climate Change

Climate change presents complex concerns to heritage, cultural continuity, as it extends beyond the preservation of physical sites, encompassing broader concerns about cultural continuity and resilience. Also at risk are the intangible cultural practices and traditional knowledge systems on which communities are founded (Smith, 2006). Seasonal cultural practices and ecological knowledge may be misaligned with new environmental realities. This disruption challenges the intergenerational transmission of heritage, highlighting the need to view heritage as a dynamic and evolving process (Harrison, 2013).

The physical impacts on climate change on heritage are also diverse and significant. Coastal archaeological sites and historic urban centres face the threat of rising sea levels, while increased rainfall and flooding have endangered structures and cultural landscapes. The UNESCO World Heritage site of Ayutthaya in Thailand is a stark example, having suffered from flood damage that threatens its architectural integrity.

Climate change also amplifies existing inequalities in heritage management. With limited resources, conservation efforts often prioritise high-profile sites at the expense of places significant to marginalised communities (Byrne, 2014), underscoring a need to develop inclusive and participatory approaches.

The climate crisis necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of heritage values and management practices. The concepts of loss and transformation have become central, challenging conventional notions of preservation and authenticity (DeSilvey, 2017). For instance, as coastal communities face potential relocation due to rising seas, questions arise on how the communities will maintain their existing cultural practices in new environments.

Traditional practices offer valuable solutions to these challenges. Many traditional building techniques and land management practices in the region are inherently climate resilient. Revival and adaptation of these practices, combined with climate science, can contribute to adaptation, promote cultural continuity, and acknowledging the connections between environmental and cultural sustainability.

However, the development of climate adaptation strategies must balance historical and political factors, including power dynamics and colonial legacies that influence perceptions of the 'traditional' and 'modern' heritage. Effective heritage protection must prioritise equitable and culturally appropriate solutions that respect these historical contexts while addressing contemporary challenges.

Addressing climate change impacts on Southeast Asian heritage require more than technical solutions. Success depends on developing heritage concepts and practices that centre community voices and experiences to create more resilient and adaptive management strategies. This will include strengthening local capacity for heritage management, supporting traditional knowledge systems, and ensuring that climate adaptation measures reflect the needs and values of affected communities.

3.4 Digital Transformation: Accessibility, Cultural, and Ethical Considerations

The digitalisation of cultural heritage across Southeast Asia has the potential to democratise access and reach audiences beyond traditional boundaries in ways that can challenge established narratives and allow for more diverse interpretations of heritage. Given that colonial legacies and national narratives have historically framed heritage discourses, digital platforms provide opportunities for local communities to reclaim their cultural stories. For example, virtual museums and online archives can preserve and showcase artefacts that might otherwise remain inaccessible due to geographical or economic constraints. The ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive has demonstrated its potential as a platform for exploring the region's diverse cultural heritage (Chong, 2020).

However, digitalisation also raises questions about representation and power dynamics. The selection of what is digitised often reflects existing biases and may inadvertently perpetuate the marginalisation of certain communities or cultural practices. While advanced technologies like 3D modelling and virtual reality (VR) can

offer immersive experiences and detailed preservation capabilities, they risk creating alternate digital realities that disconnect heritage from its social and cultural contexts. This concern is particularly relevant in AMS, where heritage practices are deeply embedded in local communities.

The digital transformation of heritage also presents complex ethical considerations, particularly regarding data ownership and intellectual property rights. Frameworks must be developed to recognise and protect indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights in the digital domain. Further, the digital divide has threatened equitable access to digital heritage resources and will continue to exacerbate existing inequalities in heritage engagement (Graham, 2016). Policymakers must ensure digital heritage initiatives do not inadvertently exclude rural or economically disadvantaged communities.

Community involvement will be key to implementing successful digital heritage initiatives. Ensuring communities participate in how their heritage is digitally represented is essential for maintaining cultural integrity and avoiding misrepresentation (Logan, 2012). Local participation becomes increasingly important as algorithmic bias in content recommendation systems often prioritises globally recognised content over local culture, potentially eroding the visibility of Southeast Asian heritage in digital spaces.

ASEAN can develop region-specific digital platforms that prioritise Southeast Asian content and incorporate local languages and cultural contexts. These platforms can bridge between traditional practices and modern technology, enabling communities to document and adapt their cultural practices for the digital age, and maintain a culture's essence. Digital capacity building within communities across Southeast Asia will empower them to produce digital cultural content, and align heritage-making with community agency and participation. As digitalisation continues, ongoing analysis and adaptive strategies will remain crucial to ensure Southeast Asian cultural heritage maintains its vitality and relevance in the digital age. These efforts must balance technological innovation with cultural sensitivity to ensure that digital transformation strengthens the depth and diversity Southeast Asian heritage.

3.5 Cultural Dialogue and Diversity through Inclusive Governance

Cultural dialogue can inform the preservation of cultural heritage. Recent developments indicate a shift to more inclusive and participatory approaches. Conventional approaches to heritage conservation are evolving through the inclusion of methods that prioritise diverse voices, with growing recognition of the significance of intangible cultural heritage.

However, substantial barriers continue to hinder meaningful cultural dialogue across Southeast Asia. Indigenous communities and informal sector workers, who are the primary guardians of traditional cultural practices, face obstacles in their cultural preservation efforts. Many communities face serious capacity challenges when engaging with official cultural preservation discourse. Digital technologies have erected barriers, with many traditional practitioners lacking access to necessary resources and technology. Language differences and educational inequalities further complicate efforts to document and preserve cultural heritage.

ASEAN Member States (AMS) can transform cultural diversity from a perceived challenge into a strategic advantage through innovative approaches. This requires adequate representation supported by accessible platforms for cross-cultural dialogue, including local language facilitation. Targeted support for marginalized communities enables the preservation of traditional knowledge while building capacity within ASEAN communities to engage meaningfully in heritage discussions.

While international expertise provides valuable guidance, governance processes must equally value local voices and knowledge. This means developing deeper understanding of cultural heritage contexts, facilitating dialogues between communities, authorities, and international bodies, and ensuring inclusive decision-making that preserves traditional knowledge while harnessing its potential for regional identity and development.

4. Repatriation of Cultural Objects

The repatriation of cultural objects to Southeast Asian countries is gaining momentum, reflecting a shift in attitudes on Western hegemony over cultural heritage and challenging dominant Western approaches to cultural heritage management. Multiple actors have worked to repatriate cultural objects through legal systems, diplomacy, international cooperation, or other means.

While individual countries have led negotiations with museums and auction houses, ASEAN provides a regional framework through the ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage (2000) and the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025. Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam have established dedicated teams within their respective cultural ministries to pursue repatriation claims. Government agencies, regional bodies, international organisations and private entities each play distinct roles in cultural heritage repatriation.

Grassroots movements and cultural institutions have also developed alternative approaches to repatriation, including collaborative exhibition programmes, knowledge-sharing initiatives, and digital repatriation projects to give source communities access to their cultural heritage. Several museums across Southeast Asia have implemented innovative approaches to display repatriated objects, often incorporating community perspectives and traditional knowledge in their interpretations.

Repatriation, however, presents complex dilemmas. Returned cultural heritage objects create new challenges for recipient institutions, particularly regarding conservation resources and expertise. Local communities may question whether national museums based on Western institutional models are appropriate destinations for objects that originally belonged to specific communities or religious institutions.

Further, repatriation efforts that offer digital access while the source items remain abroad raise debates on whether they represent adequate returns or perpetuate colonial power structures. Additionally, multiple states may claim ownership of the same cultural heritage, particularly in cases of heritage that predates contemporary national boundaries. Finally, source communities may express concerns about governments prioritising tourist revenue over traditional access and usage rights for repatriated objects.

Successful repatriations employ diverse methods tailored to specific situations and combine multiple approaches (legal, diplomatic, and community-based), and actively engage source communities throughout the process. Successful repatriation programs require comprehensive documentation systems, sustainable preservation strategies that balance accessibility with protection, and integration of traditional knowledge with modern conservation practices (Patel, 2023; Davis, 2022; Wong, 2022).

5. International Cooperation

The growth of international cooperation on cultural heritage preservation across Southeast Asia presents opportunities and obstacles. Regional initiatives, such as the proposed ASEAN Cultural Heritage List (ACHL), reflect a growing recognition of shared cultural identities and the potential for collective action. However, these efforts can inadvertently reinforce dominant narratives or eclipse alternative heritage interpretations.

Cross-border heritage projects often prioritise certain forms of heritage, typically favouring tangible sites and monuments that align with prevailing national or regional narratives (Winter, 2014). This tendency can marginalise local, minority, or contested forms of heritage, potentially deepening existing cultural disparities across the region.

The emergence of non-governmental networks like the Southeast Asian Cultural Heritage Alliance reflects more inclusive practices. These organisations can help balance top-down approaches to heritage management and provide platforms for underrepresented voices. However, even well-intentioned community engagement initiatives can unintentionally perpetuate existing power imbalances if not thoughtfully implemented.

Another issue is ASEAN's increasing reliance on external funding for cultural initiatives. While international funding provides crucial resources, it can influence project priorities and methodologies, potentially emphasising funders' interests over local needs. This dependence may create sustainability issues when external funding ceases.

AMS should consider developing sustainable funding models that prioritise local resources and expertise. Options include establishing regional heritage funds, introducing heritage-related tourism levies, and encouraging private sector involvement through corporate social responsibility programmes. Capacity-building initiatives focusing on local fundraising and project management skills could reduce long-term dependence on external funders.

International cooperation efforts need to consider how to balance regional cohesion with respect for local diversity. Regional heritage frameworks risk simplifying cultural practices and complex, living traditions, especially given the diverse cultural contexts across the region.

Moreover, international cooperation often involves knowledge and expertise transfer, potentially creating power imbalances between international experts and local practitioners. While these exchanges can build capacity, they may inadvertently impose Western-centric heritage concepts that may not be consistent with local values and traditions (Byrne, 2014).

ASEAN's cooperation initiatives should incorporate diverse voices and perspectives in the implementation and conceptualisation of heritage projects. This could involve creating dialogue spaces for various stakeholders, including those traditionally excluded from heritage discourse, and developing flexible frameworks to accommodate multiple heritage interpretations (Hitchcock et al., 2010).

Section 4: Case Studies and Best Practices

The following case studies present examples of promoting and protecting cultural heritage.

1. Cultural Diplomacy and Peacebuilding

Cultural diplomacy is an important tool for fostering peace and reconciliation, particularly in regions affected by long-standing conflicts. Initiatives such as Thailand's 'Cultural Diplomacy for Peace' programs and the Philippines' Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute's training programs have been instrumental in bridging cultural divides and promoting social cohesion. These efforts often involved youth exchanges, interfaith dialogues, and cultural immersion experiences.

These initiatives focused on intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The promotion of traditional performing arts, storytelling, and culinary practices has been crucial in fostering mutual understanding and respect across communities. For instance, Thailand's Foreign Ministry (2022), initiated programs in the nation's southern provinces to showcase traditional music, dance, and crafts to celebrate cultural diversity and promote dialogue. In Viet Nam, the preservation of Xoan singing in Phú Thọ Province has safeguarded a unique art form and strengthened community bonds and cultural identity (UNESCO, 2023), showing how ICH can contribute to social cohesion and cultural diplomacy.

The long-term impact of cultural diplomacy depends on its sustainability and integration with broader regional peacebuilding that address structural issues. AMS should develop strategies to integrate tangible and intangible cultural heritage, create platforms for regular cultural exchanges, and support community-led heritage preservation projects.

2. Cultural Initiatives for Social Cohesion and Exchange

Cultural initiatives contribute social cohesion, preserve cultural heritage across Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, restoration of ancient temples in Siem Reap has contributed to national reconciliation and reconstruction after years of civil conflict (Winter, 2008). In Myanmar, heritage protection in Bagan contributed to interfaith dialogue and national reconciliation (Kraak, 2017). Similarly, revival of traditional tai weaving has been instrumental in Timor-Leste's post-conflict recovery and nation-building (Niner, 2017).

Cultural exchange programs foster direct and personal interactions that exist outside digital platforms, promote mutual learning, and advance cultural diplomacy. The Konnect ASEAN initiative strengthened cultural bonds between ASEAN and South Korea through arts and exchange programs. Malaysia's George Town Festival and Singapore's International Festival of Arts brought together local and international artists, while initiatives like Indonesia's Ubud Writers & Readers Festival and Viet Nam's Mekong Cultural Hub have facilitated international artistic collaborations.

However, successful initiatives require sustained funding to support long-term cultural programs; inclusive participation to engage diverse community groups; clear documentation and evaluation processes to measure impact; and strong institutional partnerships between government agencies, cultural organisations, and educational institutions. Also essential is the integration traditional knowledge with contemporary practices

while ensuring cultural authenticity.

3. Connecting Artisans to Networks

Several AMS have developed innovative approaches to connect artisans with cultural networks and markets while preserving traditional crafts. Despite declining local demand, initiatives have found success by building artisan networks to develop new skills, cultivate new audiences, and integrate new digital platforms.

In Indonesia, for example, Threads of Life created networks of weavers across the archipelago to facilitate knowledge exchange with Indian textile masters and revive traditional dyeing techniques (Graci & Dodds, 2020). In Viet Nam, Sao La developed an artisan collective for ethnic minority women to join cross-cultural workshops, share embroidery techniques, and adapt heritage designs to contemporary tastes (Nguyen & Le, 2022). Meanwhile, artisans participating in the Philippines' Rags2Riches programme were trained to transform scrap cloth into accessories, combining Japanese textile recycling expertise with traditional Filipino weaving methods (Santos, 2021).

Japan has introduced programmes to revitalise its traditional industries by matching business owners with successors to revive the small and medium industries through tourism and market expansion, and using AI to preserve and transfer traditional knowledge.

Successful preservation of traditional handicrafts requires balancing cultural preservation with market innovation. Effective strategies create multi-level networks that connect artisans both horizontally (with other craftspeople) and vertically (with markets). By facilitating cross-cultural knowledge exchange and building sustainable community networks, these organisations have enabled traditional crafts to remain culturally relevant, economically viable, and authentic.

4. Revitalising Traditional Craft Villages

Craft villages across Southeast Asia have played a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage while contributing to local economies. While transmission of traditional knowledge through master-apprentice relationships is vital for their survival, many villages struggle to attract younger people, who instead have different employment aspirations and frequently seek opportunities in urban settings. Communities also face challenges related to sustainability, such as access to healthcare and education, as well as poor air quality, safety hazards, and environmental impacts. Addressing these issues requires a multidisciplinary approach involving artisans, local authorities, and experts in development, the environment, and cultural heritage to improve living and working conditions while preserving traditional practices.

For example, Viet Nam's Bat Trang pottery village requires cleaner firing technologies and structured apprenticeship programs to address the issues of pollution and skills transfer (Nguyen, 2018). In Thailand, Ban Chiang village requires artisans to adopt improved safety measures in metalworking as it encourages preservation of traditional techniques (White, 2020). In Indonesia, Balinese wood carvers benefitted from ergonomic workstations and formalised training systems (Sutton, 2019), while Malaysia's batik-producing villages in Kelantan aimed to boost traditional knowledge transmission through (Ahmad, 2021).

5. Integrating Historical Sites into Urban Design

The integration of historical sites into urban design can preserve tangible heritage while engaging with complex socio-cultural narratives. Examples include temples in Siem Reap and the Old Quarter in Hanoi. However, these efforts also raise questions about authenticity, representation, and local community involvement.

The temples of Siem Reap, Cambodia balance conservation with accessibility and economic development (Winter, 2007). Hanoi's Old Quarter exemplifies living heritage, where historical sites coexist with contemporary businesses and residences (Harrison, 2013; Poullos, 2014). However, Melaka, Malaysia, blends historical landmarks with modern infrastructure, raising questions about authenticity and representation (Gravari-Barbas, 2018; Waterton and Smith, 2010).

Successful integration of historical sites requires thoughtful urban planning that preserves authenticity while accommodating contemporary needs. Considerations include maintaining architectural integrity, ensuring community engagement in preservation decisions, and creating sustainable management systems that balance conservation with development pressures. These approaches help create living heritage spaces that serve both historical preservation and contemporary urban functions.

6. Community-Based Heritage Initiatives

Community-based initiatives increasingly involve local residents in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Cambodia's Apsara Authority's community-based tourism project near Angkor Wat trains local villagers as guides and tourism managers. While this allows residents to share traditional knowledge and benefit economically, it also risks commodifying local culture (Winter, 2007).

The Ifugao Archaeological Project in the Philippines involves community members in rice terrace excavations, fostering heritage stewardship. However, it faces challenges in balancing scientific rigour with community interpretations of their ancestry (Acabado, 2018). Malaysia's Mah Meri Cultural Village on Carey Island showcases indigenous traditional crafts and performances. While providing economic opportunities, its dynamic traditions risk becoming static displays for tourists (Kunasekaran et al., 2013).

Successful community-based heritage initiatives rely on ensuring meaningful local participation that goes beyond token involvement, creating sustainable economic benefits while avoiding over-commercialisation, and maintaining the dynamism of living traditions rather than reducing them to static displays. Projects must find an equilibrium between heritage preservation, community empowerment, economic sustainability, and authentic cultural expression to achieve lasting impact.

7. Relocation that Respects Cultural Needs

The protection of cultural heritage often involves relocation, which must respect cultural needs. In Bali, for example, homestays and cultural exchange programs provide opportunities for visitors to engage with local traditions while raising questions about cultural commodification and staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Picard, 2008). The Chinatown districts of ASEAN's cities are dynamic spaces where cultural identity is constantly reimagined and reconstructed, requiring culturally sensitive relocation (Chang, 2016). Meanwhile, the concept of cultural special economic zones attempts to reconcile economic development with cultural preservation (Harrison, 2013).

Successful cultural relocation requires paying careful attention to community agency, cultural authenticity, and sustainable development. Key principles include maintaining cultural practices while allowing for natural evolution, ensuring community participation in decision making, and creating frameworks that support both cultural preservation and economic viability. This balanced approach will help communities maintain their cultural identity while adapting to new circumstances.

8. Climate Change and Cultural Heritage

AMS have implemented several innovative programs to mitigate the severe threat that climate changes poses to cultural heritage. Conservation efforts at Borobudur Temple in Indonesia, integrate traditional Javanese water management techniques with contemporary scientific approaches (Fatimah et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). In the Philippines, the rice terraces of the Cordilleras are vulnerable to erosion and water scarcity due to changing rainfall patterns. Initiatives have focused on reviving traditional Ifugao farming practices to enhance climate resilience and cultural continuity (Camacho et al., 2020; Glover & Stone, 2018).

Meanwhile, Singapore's kampung houses face threats from rising sea levels and urban heat island effects. By adapting traditional design principles to modern urban planning, Singapore devised ways to create climate-resilient neighbourhoods that preserve cultural memory (Chong and Yeo, 2018). Further, in Hoi An, Viet Nam, authorities implemented a community-based disaster risk management program incorporating traditional knowledge into flood mitigation strategies (Binh et al., 2020; Tuan & Duc, 2019).

Effective climate adaptation for cultural heritage requires integrating traditional knowledge with modern conservation techniques. Key strategies include documenting traditional environmental management practices, developing climate-responsive conservation methods, and engaging communities in adaptation planning.

9. Repatriation of Cultural Objects

Recent repatriations in ASEAN have combined legal action, diplomatic pressure, and ethical arguments to secure returns, reflecting a shift in attitudes toward cultural heritage ownership and management. Cambodia's successful recovery of ancient statues and other cultural objects from major institutions between 2013-2023 is an excellent case study. Cambodia negotiated the return of its artefacts from major museums and private collections worldwide. The Cambodian Culture and Fine Arts Ministry worked with UNESCO and the US Justice Department to facilitate the returns, including two 10th-century statues from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and another statue from Sotheby's auction house, following legal pressure from the US government. Private collectors also voluntarily returned Khmer antiquities.

Viet Nam secured the repatriation of a statue of the Goddess Durga from illegal antiquities trade in the UK, coordinating with the US Homeland Security Department and the London Metropolitan Police. The Vietnam National Museum of History established protocols for receiving, transporting, storing, and preserving repatriated objects. The museum received additional artefacts from the US in 2022 and passed legislation establishing guidelines for cultural heritage preservation and repatriation (Nguyen, 2022).

Indonesia secured significant returns in 2024 of plundered historical artefacts from the Dutch government, which acknowledged objects were stolen during its colonial rule. Diplomatic negotiations built on a 2017 cultural agreement between Indonesia and the Netherlands. The Indonesian Education Ministry and National Museum developed protocols that emphasised preservation and public access.

Malaysia secured the return of a sun hat looted by the British White Rajahs to the Kenyah Badeng community in Sarawak, as well as prehistoric remains from the Netherlands. The hat's return was initiated when a Sarawak Museum audit discovered the item at a museum in Oxford. The museum's decision to return the objects acknowledged the colonial violence associated with their acquisition and set a precedent for community-centred repatriation.

Section 5: Conclusion

The protecting and promotion of cultural heritage across Southeast Asia is a complex effort that must be relevant to the regional cultures and to the rapidly changing developments. Beyond stimulating economic growth, cultural initiatives can preserve the region's cultural diversity and contribute to social cohesion.

Digitalisation offers new opportunities for heritage preservation, from virtual museums to AR experiences at historical sites. While boosting access, digitalisation also raises questions on authenticity and risks widening digital divides. AMS must ensure that their use of digital tools complements, rather than replace, traditional forms of heritage engagement.

Climate change poses a substantial threat to tangible and intangible heritage across Southeast Asia as rising sea levels and changing weather patterns disrupt historical sites and traditional practices. Adaptive approaches that blend traditional knowledge with contemporary conservation techniques are promising, although they need to be incorporated into broader climate resilience plans.

The economic potential of cultural heritage can raise challenges. While it can bring substantial tourism revenue to the region, they bear the risk of over-commercialisation and cultural erosion. Sustainable, community-based tourism models offer a potential solution, and require careful planning and ongoing monitoring to balance economic benefits with cultural preservation.

Balanced community involvement is central to effective cultural heritage protection. Local stakeholders play an important role in heritage management and preservation in important ways, such as community museums and participatory archaeological projects. Collaborative approaches ensure sustainable preservation efforts by integrating local knowledge with professional expertise to keep traditions alive,

The repatriation of cultural artefacts is becoming a critical aspect of heritage preservation. Southeast Asian countries are actively pursuing the return of objects removed during colonial periods as expressions of their cultural identity. The process involves complex diplomatic negotiations and ethical considerations, challenging institutions to create meaningful dialogues about cultural ownership and historical injustice.

Although international collaboration has become essential in addressing these complex challenges, care must be taken to respect local contexts and prevent cultural homogenisation.

As ASEAN navigates these challenges, it must find an appropriate balance between preservation and progress, tradition and innovation, and local identity and global engagement. By embracing innovative approaches, fostering inclusiveness, and committing to cultural diversity, ASEAN can ensure that the rich heritage will thrive as a source of creativity, identity, and sustainable development.

References

- ASEAN Secretariat. (2016). ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat.
- ASEAN Secretariat. (2016a). ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025. ASEAN Secretariat.
- ASEAN. (2000). ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat.
- ASEAN. (2007a). The ASEAN Charter. ASEAN Secretariat.
- ASEAN. (2007b). ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers. ASEAN Secretariat.
- Acabado, S. (2018). Zones of refuge: Resisting conquest in the northern Philippine highlands through environmental practice. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 52, 180-195.
- Ahmad, S. (2021). The art of batik: Tradition and innovation in Kelantan, Malaysia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Crafts*, 15(2), 78-93.
- Anh, N. (2023). Viet Nam recovers bronze Durga statue from illegal UK trade. *Viet Nam News*, 15 August.
- Bendix, R. (2009). Heritage between economy and politics: An assessment from the perspective of cultural anthropology. In L. Smith & N. Akagawa (Eds.), *Intangible Heritage* (pp. 253-269). Routledge.
- Binh, D. V., et al. (2020). Study on the impacts of sea-level rise on the Hoi An World Heritage site. *Water*, 12(7), 1905.
- Byrne, D. (2014). *Counterheritage: Critical perspectives on heritage conservation in Asia*. Routledge.
- Camacho, L. D., et al. (2020). Indigenous knowledge and practices for the sustainable management of Ifugao forests in Cordillera, Philippines. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 118, 102220.
- Chang, T. C. (2016). 'New uses need old buildings': Gentrification aesthetics and the arts in Singapore. *Urban Studies*, 53(3), 524-539.
- Chong, T. (2020). The ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive: Preserving and sharing ASEAN's cultural heritage. *SPAFA Journal*, 4, 1-12.
- Davis, T. (2022). Cambodia's heritage recovery programme: A model for Southeast Asia. *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 29(2), 145-162.
- DeSilvey, C. (2017). *Curated decay: Heritage beyond saving*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Fatimah, T., et al. (2021). Challenges in the conservation of Borobudur Temple as a World Cultural Heritage site in the era of climate change. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 724(1), 012118.
- Graham, B. (2016). Heritage and the digital era. In E. Waterton & S. Watson (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* (pp. 451-469). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Graci, S., & Dodds, R. (2020). Artisan networks and craft revival in Indonesia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*.
- Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical approaches*. Routledge.
- Henderson, J. C. (2012). Conserving heritage in South East Asia: Cases from Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 37(1), 47-55.
- Hitchcock, M., King, V. T., & Parnwell, M. (2010). *Heritage tourism in Southeast Asia*. NIAS Press.
- Ismail, S. (2023). 41 prehistoric remains repatriated to Malaysia from Netherlands. *New Straits Times*, 10 January.
- Jerryson, M. (2021). Cultural diplomacy and conflict transformation in Southern Thailand. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 52(2), 215-234.
- King, V. T. (2016). UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World heritage sites in comparative perspective.

NIAS Press.

Kraak, A. L. (2017). Impediments to a human rights-based approach to heritage conservation: The case of Bagan, Myanmar. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23(4), 433-450.

Kunasekaran, P., et al. (2013). Measuring sustainable indigenous tourism indicators: A case of Mah Meri ethnic group in Carey Island, Malaysia. *Sustainability*, 5(9), 3673-3699.

Lee, S. (2022). Looted Kenyah Badeng sunhat returned to Sarawak community. *The Borneo Post*, 5 July.

Logan, W. (2012). Cultural diversity, cultural heritage and human rights: Towards heritage management as human rights-based cultural practice. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 18(3), 231-244.

Mashberg, T., & Blumenthal, R. (2023). Met Museum to Return More Cambodian Artefacts Tied to Accused Trafficker. *The New York Times*.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand. (2022). Annual Report on Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives. Bangkok: Government Printing Office.

Nguyen, T. (2018). Bat Trang pottery: A living heritage of Viet Nam. *Asian Ceramics Quarterly*, 42(3), 112-127.

Nguyen, T. (2022). Viet Nam National Museum of History receives artefacts from US. *Nhan Dan*, 18 November.

Nguyen, T., & Le, M. (2022). Traditional craft collectives in modern Viet Nam. *Asian Ethnology*.

Niner, S. (2017). Reflection on the special gender stream: 2017 Timor-Leste Studies Association conference. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 10(2), 275-279.

Patel, K. (2023). Repatriation dilemmas: Navigating cultural heritage complexities. *Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12(3), 45-67.

Pawakapan, N. (2015). One Tambon One Product: A Thai poverty-reduction policy gone global. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2015(1), 355-373.

Santos, M. (2021). Sustainable craft enterprises in the Philippines. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management*.

Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. Routledge.

Stone, P. (2023). Community engagement in Southeast Asian museums: New approaches to repatriated heritage. *Museum International*, 75(1-2), 86-99.

Sutton, R. (2019). Wood carving traditions in Balinese culture: The case of Mas village. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 501-518.

Taylor, K., & Lennon, J. (2011). Cultural Landscapes: A Bridge Between Culture and Nature? *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 17(6), 537-554.

Tuan, T. H., & Duc, T. A. (2019). A community-based disaster risk management approach in Hoi An City, Viet Nam. In *Climate Change and Asian Cities* (pp. 157-173). Springer.

UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2023). *Safeguarding Xoan Singing in Phú Thọ Province, Viet Nam*. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

White, J. C. (2020). Ban Chiang: From prehistoric crafts to modern reproductions. *Archaeology in Southeast Asia*, 8(1), 45-62.

Winter, T. (2008). Post-conflict heritage and tourism in Cambodia: The burden of Angkor. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14(6), 524-539.

Winter, T. (2014). Beyond Eurocentrism? Heritage conservation and the politics of difference. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20(2), 123-137.

Wong, A. (2022). Cultural property law and repatriation in Southeast Asia: A comparative analysis. *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 9(2), 256-278.

World Economic Forum (2025). Japan's succession problem: how the country is safeguarding heritage through business, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/04/japan-business-succession-traditional/>

The ASEAN Secretariat
ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Department
Jalan Sisingamangaraja 70A
Jakarta 12110, Indonesia

www.asean.org

