

## Approaches to Increase the Cultural Capital Potential to Promote Community Product Development: A Case Study of the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise in Samut Songkhram Province

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### Abstract

The purposes of this study were to analyze the cultural capital potential of the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise in Samut Songkhram province of Thailand and present an approach to develop the products created from cultural capital accumulated within the Lad Yai community. This qualitative research was gathered data from a literature review, in-depth interviews, and a focus group selected from a sample of representatives who have the potential to develop cultural capital. It was found that the internal capital of the enterprise is well ready, but what requires the most urgent support is marketing. Concerning approaches to develop their products, the enterprise should diversify their products and make them appropriate for daily usage. This research also suggested integrating the selling points of the cultural capital of salt farming into the community products and applying this identity to increase demand and add value.

**Keywords:** Cultural capital; Community products development; Sea salt; Community enterprise

### Introduction

Strategies to develop communities and preserve Thai culture have become an important focus for successive Thai governments. This often entails supporting the creation of local businesses and/or products such as the One Tambon, One Product (OTOP) program and policies supporting

SMEs in local communities by adding value and branding Thai products to enhance competitiveness, especially regarding cultural products such as handicrafts, souvenirs, tourism, and artwork. Such efforts create jobs, generate income for communities, and strengthen society at the grass roots level (Thailand Creative and Design Center, 2018). As a result, developing the creative economy has increasingly become a significant part of national economic development plans. One success factor for this relies on developing the cultural capital of communities that have the potential to create products based on local culture and knowledge. Cultural capital is a key element of social capital and can lead to greater economic capital that generates income and improves the standard of living for Thai people (Pholpirul, 2013). Cultural capital based on local knowledge not only becomes a channel to generate income from cultural heritage but also helps preserve and restore traditional identity and livelihoods in a sustainable way.

Sea salt production or salt farming has long been a traditional occupation in several Thai provinces located near the sea with clay soil and relies on traditional local knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation. It is a process in which seawater is pumped into a plot of land until it becomes flooded. The seawater undergoes a number of traditional processing steps which eventually result in a natural high-quality salt with a high mineral content. Although salt farming has been a traditional occupation of communities located along the Gulf of Thailand such as Phetchaburi, Samut Sakhon, and Samut Songkhram provinces for more than a century, nowadays it is becoming increasingly rare as the price of salt continues to drop. As a result, salt farmers have turned to other jobs such as shrimp farming or working in industrial factories that provide a steadier income. Taken all together, salt farming and its associated culture are in decline.

The researchers intend to analyze the problems and find new approaches to increase the cultural capital potential of traditional salt farming communities so that they can develop distinctive products that provide high economic and social benefits within the community.

## Research Objective

To analyze problems and present practical approaches to developing creative products for the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise in Samut Songkhram province by increasing their cultural capital potential.

## Scope of the Research

The scope of study, content, area, population, and key informants are designated as following. Firstly, this study is the micro study of the area in Samut Songkhram province, where the cultural capital of salt farmer groups is explored. Communities were selected according to their qualification which serves to answer the research questions. Accordingly, the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise in Samut Songkhram province was selected. Secondly, the population and key informants were selected with purposive sampling approach. They were the leaders of community enterprises and related scholars. Data were collected from focus group conversation with representatives who could drive the development of the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise's social capital.

## Literature Reviews

### Cultural Capital Concept

Cultural capital is a form of capital related to the values, knowledge, and creativity of distinct societies. It can be seen as an asset that embodies cultural value and accumulates economic value. Cultural capital can be expressed in both tangible and intangible ways which involve human concepts and creativity. It can appear in a form that displays cultural value. From the economic perspective, cultural goods and services are a kind of cultural capital that hold both cultural and economic value (UNESCO, 2004)

The concept of cultural capital was initially put forth by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist who expanded the economic concept of capital to highlight the importance of social and cultural factors in determining opportunities to obtain wealth and power in society. Bourdieu (1993) explained that cultural capital has three features that are *embodied*, such as knowledge and skills that help people use cultural power; *objectified*, such as concrete assets that have cultural values like antiques and artwork; and *institutionalized*, including institutional intervention and cultural morality. In his view, cultural capital should be seen as a distinct type of capital. For instance, the economic value of a historic building or artwork will be increased when it is recognized as having cultural value. Likewise, a society or community having strong cultural capital in the form of either tangible or intangible assets can create economic value and employment opportunities by marketing products holding cultural value and using local knowledge and skilled labor.

Griswold & Wright (2004) provided a definition of cultural capital based on the concept of Bourdieu in which culture is perceived as capital that can be accumulated and invested as economic capital or can be transformed into economic value. Cultural capital can be seen as influencing perceptions of cultural taste and livelihood, as well as accumulated capital leading to power and influence in society.

Patamasiriwat (2006) noted that cultural capital can be important for national economic and social development, and is highly dynamic because of increasing globalization. He also perceived the evolution of Thailand's cultural capital dating back to the country's barter system, before the era of monetary exchange. Respect and honor were afforded to elders and those higher up in the social hierarchy. Later, as Thai people accepted technology, established capitalist markets, and increasingly valued wealth and science, cultural capital and traditional knowledge became seen as outdated. However, as modern global culture has become more prevalent, people have turned to traditional culture and knowledge as a selling point, and national artists, folk artists, and traditional culture have been promoted.

Thanapornpun (1997) presented cultural capital as an increasingly important emerging factor in the world today. This idea came from the observation that global capitalism impacts customs, ways of life, and the very thoughts of people in societies around the world. Cultural capital in this view refers to capital used for producing goods and services with cultural implications. Any goods and services that are culturally embodied thus are cultural products. Each type of good or product can be seen as having a cultural implication of a different level and intensity. For example, fresh noodles have a cultural implication different from instant noodles. Cultural capital can be seen as becoming an increasingly important capital in the global economy.

In sum, cultural capital has value, either tangible or intangible, that can provide economic benefits to improve the standard of living of societies. It may involve the knowledge, customs, and art of local communities. Cultural capital further includes values and beliefs that bind a society together, underlying a social order and rules that have value to the whole society. On the most basic level, cultural capital is associated with the preservation of traditional arts and culture, customs, and learning. On the other hand, cultural capital can also play an important role in promoting the economy, the production of commercial and industrial products, and supporting the tourism and services sectors of a country. The Thai government has several policies and action plans which aim to promote cultural capital commercially as it is considered as 'upstream' within the economic chain.

This has opened up opportunities for new businesses related to creating products which integrate cultural content into the business strategy.

## Methodology

this section was to present the framework and methodology applied in the research on approaches to increase the cultural capital potential to promote community product development in the Lad Yai herbal salt community enterprise in Samut Songkhram Province. It was a qualitative study using documentary research, in-depth interviews, and a focus group selected by purposive sampling to collect information from the community leader, knowledgeable locals to promote community goods and products, members of the enterprise, and academics. Once the research team collected enough documentary data and field data for the research objectives, the preliminary analysis would be conducted and data would be organized into themes. The themes are therefore concluded as the guideline for further analysis and data collection. Afterwards there was an additional data collection by re-interviewing in some issues and conducting focus group for the benefit of data analysis. Data were analyzed and interpreted from concrete evidence or phenomenon found from the focus group discussions with ten members of the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise. The information was further analyzed through content analysis that connects the collected content with the related frameworks and concepts. It was concluded with descriptive analysis.

## Results

The study reveals that Lad Yai is a community that has a culture and livelihood long engaged with salt farming. It is located in the northern part of the Amphoe Muang district of Samut Songkhram province and around 1 kilometer away from downtown. The general geography of this area is floodplain which can be flooded by seawater throughout the year. As a result, it has high saline soil conditions. The suitable agriculture in this area is coconut planting, salt farming, and brackish water aquaculture. The community area had been used for planting coconut trees to produce coconut sugar for centuries, but about thirty years ago a dam was constructed to block the Mae Klong River causing high tidewater and flooding the land with salt water. Since then its soil has had a high saline content and cannot be used for planting a diversity of agricultural products. Flooded

by salt water, this area now has salt farms as the mainland usage (Department of Agriculture, 2018).

Most of the villagers are either salt farmers or general employees. Nowadays, economic development in the community has increased both in the form of facilities and infrastructure, which has led to a reduction in salt farming due to its difficulty. Salt farming requires outdoor labor and salt production varies depending on season and climatic conditions (such as water, wind and sunlight) which are essential for salt farming. This, along with the low market price for salt, has led the younger generation to perceive salt farming as not a worthy occupation. As a result, many have turned to working outside the community according to an analysis of the Department of Agricultural Extension (2018), which also reveals that most salt farmers have to pay higher rents for land for salt farming, costing nearly half the profits of total salt production. Moreover, large landholders have begun to sell their lands to property developers entering into the community for the construction of shopping malls, factories, buildings and other facilities. This combination of factors has induced many salt farmers to stop farming salt.

However, there are members of the community who value this traditional occupation and see it as being culturally important. A focus group discussion with members of Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise showed that they wish to continue, develop, and pass on the tradition of salt farming to the next generation by upgrading the community to be an ‘innovative village.’ It is hoped that salt farming culture can be improved to benefit to all parties by developing herbal salt products and establishing a learning and processing product center. The Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise was established by thirty members to assess their cultural capital and to develop products that fulfill the potential of the community. First, they formed a joint venture cooperative in 2003. Last, it was supported by provincial agencies in terms of knowledge and budget. The process of identifying and developing ‘flower of salt’ OTOP products of the community and upgrading to be an OTOP innovative village based on the local culture is shown in Figure 1.

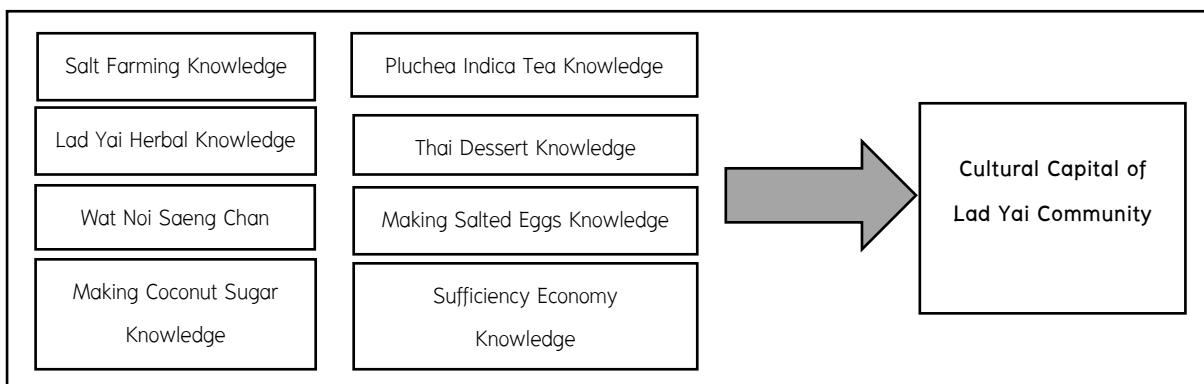


Figure 1: Cultural Capital of Lad Yai Community

Salt produced by the sea salt group in Lad Yai, Amphoe Muang, Samut Songkhram province is well known for its purity, and for not containing any toxic contamination from polluted water, dust, or hazardous smog from factories. The community leader explained during a focus group discussion that salt farming knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation for hundreds of years. This also extends to the knowledge of growing crops and plants under the concept of the sufficiency economy, producing traditional coconut sugar, and making salted eggs.

Villagers came together and eventually registered the Lad Yai Community Enterprise bringing sea salt to be processed into herbal salt products for health and beauty such as spa salts, salt body scrub, salt aroma, and salt liquid soap (Chankong, 2019).

Leveraging and adding value to salt production in the form of health and spa products generates more income for local farmers and is the result of cooperation between community leaders and members. It has also been strengthened by external organizations that support knowledge and innovation including the Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy of Thammasat University, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Bang Keaw campus, Community Development Department in Samut Songkhram province, Samut Songkhram Provincial Public Health Office, and Government Savings Bank as shown in Figure 2, explaining how salt farming knowledge has been developed into herbal salt products.

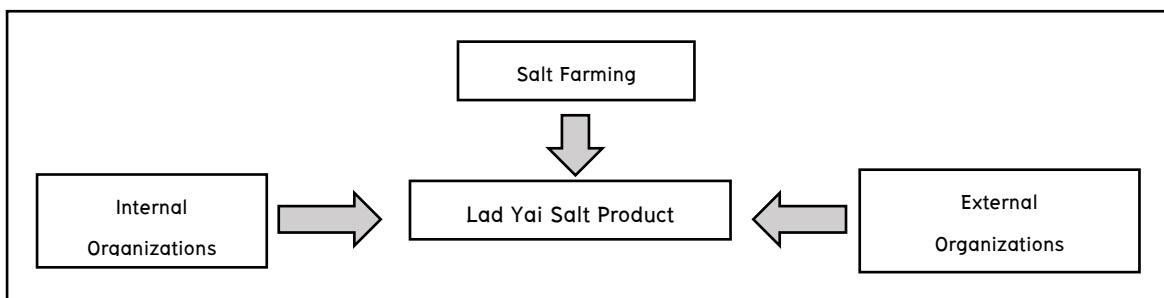


Figure 2: Development of Herbal Salt Products.

### 1. Analyzing the problem of increasing the cultural capital potential of the Lad Yai herbal salt community enterprise

The focus group discussion centered mainly on the general problem of salt farming which is that most the farmers were small-scale farmers who had to rent farmland. However, the farmers also explained that an environmental problem increasingly impacted their farming exemplified by changing seasons. Salt farming requires wind and sun but if there is a lot of rain, it will dilute the intensity of the salt, creating a serious obstacle for farming. In addition, imported salt from overseas has driven domestic prices down, creating a serious problem for local farmers who have difficulty selling their products. This has led to increased household debt and debts from capital investment. In an interview, the head of the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise stated that “with lack of knowledge and inadequate experience in calculating cost, our products are sold at a price below cost”. In addition, transporting heavy flower of salt pots back and forth to show at events is not worth it compared with transportation costs. Therefore, we need to process our products and add to their value” (Chankong, 2019).

Although there have been attempts to process sea salt into various types of products to add more value and also there has been support from the external organization including government agencies and educational institutions, both in the form of capital and knowledge, the community enterprise has not been able to improve its situation. The focus group discussion with the enterprise members reveals that since it has to produce and sell products on its own, they face marketing problems and added costs of packaging and transportation. The community enterprise also lacks the labor necessary to process raw material into herbal salt products and needs more younger workers to preserve salt farming and add value to their products.

Another problem the Lad Yai community is facing the competition with other entrepreneurs who do not run salt farms but produce the same types of products to sell in the health and beauty

market. Nowadays, the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise supplies spa salts and herbal salt products to many shops for selling to tourists in the province, including the community shop in the Amphawa-Chaipattananurak Conservation Project, Samut Songkram province and online through the Facebook page for Lad Yai Herbs Salt (Sudsanguan, 2019). However, in the focus group discussion members of the enterprise agreed that one of the biggest problems is marketing. Its products remain not widely known and are mostly made to order. Nevertheless, they strongly believe that their enterprise can grow if members maintain their efforts and pay attention to product quality, bringing customers to repurchase their products.

The Lad Yai Salt Farming Learning Center receives funding from the Subdistrict Administration Organization and has been allocated land of Wat Noi Saeng Chan, an important temple of the community. However, the center is needed to attract more people visit. The focus group discussion reveals that the location of the center does not facilitate building a salt barn because normally the barn will be built at the center of salt farmland which tends to be very hot and windy; thus, it is not particularly suitable for educating or lecturing. Moreover, there is the problem of constructing a road to the entrance because the land is expensive and owned by several different private landholders. The learning center Lad Yai requires more support and cooperation in order to fulfill its goals. This situation is different from a private salt farm learning center that has a better location to attract tourists and for taking photos.

Even though it faces problems, the field study and focus group discussion shows that the internal capital of the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise is well prepared in many aspects, especially staff, who are knowledgeable about salt farming and local culture. It receives good cooperation in conducting group activities. Also, the enterprise has the support of community leaders and the children of villagers who can become the main force to develop products and packaging, apply product standards, and launch online markets. However, the enterprise still urgently requires financial support. Sustainable marketing requires support from the government both on the policy and practical levels. Promoting sales at the provincial level is insufficient to generate a steady income for the enterprise.

## **2. Approaches to developing creative products for increasing the cultural capital Potential**

Developing existing cultural capital into products to expand the product market and tourist products will require some transformation to create utility through modification, commodification, and

standardization processes (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). New products must respond to utilitarian needs. Accordingly, in developing new types of Lad Yai products, what customers will use the products for and how they will use them for must be considered. In addition, the enterprise needs to integrate their knowledge and cultural capital into product value. They hope to help address the negative impact of falling salt prices through the establishment of the learning and processing center with financial and knowledge support from both government and private sectors. Also, the enterprise has plans to develop flower of salt into herbal scrubs, soaps, and foot spa salts and sell these products in the learning center and at important events in the province. This reflects developing sea salt products and modifying products based upon demand, leveraging from selling flower of salt for consumption in general industries.

One interesting approach to increase their cultural capital potential is to create an identity for the herbal salt products, differentiating them from similar products. This will require developing a distinct identity and brand for the products. They may add a background story as cultural capital into the products, showing about their unique local culture.

For raw materials, the enterprise may focus on their raw materials as being of high quality, rare, and renowned. They may also highlight the unique points such as their sea salt dissolving at a slower rate than general salt when it is used for skin scrub products.

Next, the enterprise can present a narrative of the production process describing their careful processes and history of salt farming in the community to persuade listeners to feel that what they are touching is not made easily and has to go through many rigorous steps before becoming a finished product. This is in accordance with a concept of Japanese OVOP concept (One Village, One Product) that promotes local knowledge on a global scale (Local Yet Global). In terms of adapting local knowledge and culture to create new products, they may focus on attracting general customers, while also emphasizing high quality. In addition, some modern processes may be applied where innovation and technology can adequately substitute labor to add more value to enter into the wider health market.

In addition, they may present the individual stories of producers or of the enterprise so that purchasers can know more about the people who create the products. This may also help persuade them to take part in helping Thai farmers by purchasing products made by local people.

It can be seen that bringing cultural capital out and developing it into tangible products needs to incorporate product utility. Also, existing cultural capital can be brought out to create a brand

story to impress customers. Passing on traditional stories and local knowledge of the community, showing about products, and introducing the origin of the community to people are methods to make product brands more attractive and can become a key for marketing. Furthermore, telling stories about the local culture and knowledge in packaging and promotions will hopefully make the brand more attractive to customers and persuade them to choose Lad Yai products.

Data from the in-depth interviews and the focus group further revealed that the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise has attempted to develop sea salt into more than 9 types of spa and beauty products based on utility and beauty needs. They also highlight that the sea salt that is a major ingredient of their products can be mixed with other Thai herbs. In addition, the enterprise is supported by external organizations including educational institutes and provincial agencies. However, the herbal sea salt products of the enterprise need to better utilize their story as cultural capital. Their packaging looks good and modern, but does not present their background and local knowledge that can generate interest as much as it should. The enterprise also has a problem of marketing. Marketing through shops and online channels should also integrate the local identity and cultural capital of Lad Yai sea salt farming. They may present information about the raw materials, production processes, producers, the cultural history of salt farming, and the traditional benefits of sea salt.

## Conclusion

Due to the problem of salt price decrease, members of the Lad Yai community found a community enterprise of Lad Yai Herbal Salt to solve the problem together. And they found that apart from the main cultural capital in salt, there were also other cultural capital in Lad Yai community such as the herbs, Pluchea Indica Tea, making coconut sugar, and Thai dessert knowledge. It was found that Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise is ready to develop internal capital into community products with their resources in human, knowledge, budget, and coordination with external agencies. Nevertheless, the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise still lacks readiness in marketing. Entrepreneurs must therefore seek to add the varied marketing strategy. And the government sector should provide support for their marketing development. In terms of product development, the Lad Yai Herbal Salt Community Enterprise could develop a variety of products with beautiful packaging. However, they could utilize other cultural capital and wisdom which exist together with their products and community, and communicate them on the packaging so that the

customers will be aware of the identity of product origins, identity of production process and stories and identity from the health benefit, which will enhance and add value to the groups' products.

## Discussion

The salt farming culture and local livelihood are unique features of the Lad Yai community. Their product development results from the concerted efforts of the leader and members of the enterprise in adding more value to the community's assets to further develop several types of salt products. This reflects that transforming cultural capital into products requires some modification to create product utility together with adding cultural value of goods and products. This is in accordance with Direk (2006) and Thanaphonphan (1997) who argue that local wisdom can become a selling point of cultural products. Developing goods and services that have cultural implications can be done by bringing existing cultural capital to create unique value for products as well as boost tourism. Cultural capital makes products' value higher because it is upstream in the value chain. Cultural capital such as cultural stories and content can be used to distinguish products or add a unique selling point to products, thus adding value to goods and services (Ministry of Culture, 2019).

Although the Lad Yai salt community has cultural capital, receives funding support, has its own human capital including the leader and enterprise members, has knowledge capital both in traditional knowledge and innovative knowledge obtained from the external organizations, the enterprise still has problems developing creative products to be more diversified and distinguishable from other salt products. In terms of creating new products, an action plan for the OTOP project between 2019 – 2022 showed that most of the community entrepreneurs have inadequate knowledge and understanding about product quality and do not currently use innovation and technology to enhance local knowledge to make their products distinguishable and have a unique identity (The OTOP Committee, 2019). In addition, the enterprise needs to find a stable network to sell their products and have sustainable marketing. Although the enterprise has some younger people involved in helping applying product standards and creating an online market, it is likely not enough to make their products become well known.

By adopting cultural capital to promote product development, the enterprise needs to give importance to product utility. They also should focus on a target group who would be most interested in their products, as well as create an identity for their products that incorporates existing cultural capital into its products and packaging. They may emphasize the unique qualities of their sea salt

such as its benefits, raw materials, production process, and stories of local culture or producers to develop a concrete form including several different types of packaging and advertisements. This is in line with the research of Kusiyarungsit (2017) who proposed that storytelling of OTOP products is needed to differentiate the products from competitors. Furthermore, they may tell stories about their cultural heritage which has been passed on from generation to generation and the product management that has allowed the community to grow to show customers that buying their products also helps the community generate income and perpetuate itself.

Cultural capital can be an advantage that can be developed into goods and products. Thailand is full of local knowledge and culture which is important for developing the country in several dimensions; however, it still needs to apply these resources more practically and usefully. Adding to product value and developing products based on culture depends on adopting local knowledge as well as applying technology.

## Suggestions

Both cultural and intellectual capital is essential for Thailand's development. Promoting cultural products must combine both human resource capital, including experienced and knowledgeable people, and cultural capital accumulated within the community. As a result, finding value in the community, presenting a unique selling point, encouraging the community to produce goods and promote tourist attractions, enriching knowledge and ability, achieving standards, building networks, and accessing new markets are practical approaches that enterprises and government agencies have to implement together.

In terms of policy recommendations, the relevant government agencies should provide the enterprise with an active strategy to develop their competitive potential, particularly in providing study, research, training and workshops to develop products made using sea salt that add value to the products and make the sea salt farming occupation sustainable. Also, the government agencies should encourage local educational institutions to increase their role in researching and developing types of sea salt products by passing on knowledge, innovation and modern technology to sea salt farmers and sea salt enterprises.

In addition, the relevant agencies should promote creating an image and raising awareness of the nutritional benefits as well as health and beauty utility of sea salt. For the entrepreneur, they should expand direct communication channels between producers and customers, increase sales

channel on online platforms such as Facebook and LINE or online shop platforms such as Lazada or Shopee to expand their market base and increase opportunities to sell products to customers directly, without the need to sell products through shops or a middleman.

Furthermore, the government sector should support building networks between the sea salt farmers and other downstream industries, for example, consumer goods industries that use salt sea. To modify sea salt for use in health, beauty and spa products, the entrepreneur should work on establishing a marketing network that serves their products including spas, shops, health and beauty product producers, and provincial OTOP shops to ensure sustainable production and markets.

Finally, in applying cultural capital, national policies and government projects should require integration among agencies to develop products based on cultural and intellectual capital together with promoting product quality and standards that focus on products' unique properties and research the market demand in order to adopt and develop the cultural capital of each community on an ongoing basis to bring local grass root products to the global market.

## New Knowledge

The new knowledge in this study is the utilization of cultural capital in the enhancement of unique product development, or the three identities, which could be conveyed through the label or packaging of products in order to enhance and add their value. The three identities include the identity from the origin, identity from the production process and stories, and the identity from the health benefits. Product identity must emphasize the origin of ingredients on their uniqueness and specific quality, which originated from or with the local and cultural wisdom of the community, especially on how they differ from ingredients of another region. Regarding the identity from the production process and stories, entrepreneurs must emphasize the communication of how they utilize local and cultural wisdom in the production process. The story of products should also reflect the existing culture in a community which is used in product manufacturing, or how the local wisdom might be integrated in the production technology. Regarding the health benefit identity, entrepreneurs should show the customer the unique health benefit which reflects the community wisdom. For example, the label could describe the flower of salt's health benefit in terms of high nutritional values, pimple prevention, foot deodorization, and anti-dandruff, etc.

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