

Sustainable Tourism As A Governance Mechanism For Ethnic Identity Preservation Aligned With Sustainable Cities And Communities: Lessons From Tai Dam Heritage In Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to (1) examine how Tai Dam ethnic identity is negotiated within sustainable tourism development, (2) analyze the role of ethnic identity as a governance mechanism guiding tourism practices aligned with sustainable cities and communities, and (3) propose strategic policy directions for promoting culturally grounded heritage tourism based on Tai Dam ethnic identity in Thailand. An embedded mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a survey of 150 Tai Dam community members with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to capture community perspectives on identity, governance, and sustainability. The findings demonstrate that Tai Dam ethnic identity functions not only as cultural heritage but also as an informal governance mechanism regulating tourism development. Identity-based norms shape participation, define ethical boundaries, strengthen social cohesion, support community-based livelihoods, facilitate intergenerational knowledge transmission, and guide environmental stewardship. These governance processes align local tourism practices with several SDGs, particularly SDGs 4, 8, 11, 12, 15, and 16, while mediating power relations among community actors and external stakeholders

Keywords: sustainable tourism; heritage governance; ethnic identity; community-based tourism; sustainable cities and communities

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism has increasingly been recognized as a strategic approach for balancing economic development with the preservation of cultural diversity and community well-being, particularly in ethnic minority contexts. In recent decades, rapid globalization, modernization, and tourism commercialization have contributed to the gradual erosion of ethnic identities worldwide, especially among small indigenous and ethnic communities whose cultural practices are closely tied to local ecological and social systems (UNESCO, 2021; Richards, 2022). While tourism is often promoted as a tool for heritage preservation, its impacts on ethnic identity are neither uniform nor inherently positive. Without appropriate forms of governance and community control, tourism development may accelerate cultural dilution rather than safeguard cultural continuity.

In Thailand, the Tai Dam ethnic group represents a distinctive cultural community with a rich heritage encompassing language, rituals, beliefs, traditional dress, architecture, and ecological knowledge. However, these cultural assets are increasingly at risk of transformation and loss under external socio-economic pressures and unregulated tourism development. As tourism expands into ethnic communities, questions emerge not only about preservation outcomes, but also about who governs cultural representation, whose values shape tourism practices, and how ethnic identity is negotiated in the process.

Historically, the Tai Dam (also known as Black Tai) are an ethnic subgroup of the broader Tai peoples whose ancestral homeland is in northwest Vietnam, in the region historically referred to as Sip Song Chau Tai (Twelve Tai Principalities), with subsequent migrations through Laos and Thailand due to colonial and political

upheavals (Burusphat, 2023). They began migrating in significant numbers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dispersing into neighboring countries (Burusphat, 2023; Hongsuwan & Sritharet, 2022). In Thailand, Tai Dam communities are found in provinces such as Loei, Phetchaburi, Nakhon Pathom, and Ratchaburi, with some settlements dating back to the late 1800s (Hongsuwan & Sritharet, 2022). Although considered a minority group, their traditional practices, language, and social organization have faced increasing pressures from sociocultural change and assimilation. Many elements of their intangible heritage have diminished, highlighting the ongoing risk of cultural erosion in the absence of targeted conservation strategies and community empowerment (Hongsuwan & Sritharet, 2022).

Previous studies indicate that ethnic tourism, while offering economic opportunities, may also lead to cultural commodification and the staging of traditions to meet tourist expectations (Cohen, 2020; Salazar & Graburn, 2021). In Tai Dam communities, rituals, festivals, traditional cuisine, and handicrafts are increasingly incorporated into tourism activities. Without effective community participation and culturally grounded governance mechanisms, such practices risk undermining cultural meanings and marginalizing local voices (Boley & Green, 2023). The ecological-cultural context of these communities further underscores the urgency of sustainable tourism development, as ethnic identity is embedded in everyday practices, land use, and social relations (Timothy, 2022). Tourism-driven change, economic migration, and environmental pressures increasingly disrupt this balance, threatening both cultural heritage and community livelihoods.

Capacity development within ethnic communities therefore plays a critical role in sustaining ethnic identity through tourism. Empowering local stakeholders with skills in cultural interpretation, heritage management, participatory tourism planning, and sustainable entrepreneurship enhances the community's capacity to influence how culture is represented and governed within tourism systems (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020; Scheyvens et al., 2023). Community-based and culturally sensitive tourism models emphasize local ownership, respect for indigenous knowledge, and adaptive management aligned with local values rather than externally imposed tourism agendas. These approaches suggest that ethnic identity can function not only as cultural heritage, but also as a regulatory and normative mechanism shaping acceptable tourism practices at the community level. Aligning sustainable tourism with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides an overarching framework for addressing economic, social, cultural, and environmental challenges in ethnic communities. Sustainable tourism contributes to SDG 8 (inclusive economic growth), SDG 11 (cultural heritage preservation), and SDG 12 (responsible consumption

and production) (UNWTO, 2022; United Nations, 2023). In the Tai Dam context, integrating SDGs into tourism planning supports economic resilience, cultural continuity, and social equity. Recent studies further suggest that alignment with SDGs requires attention to governance structures, leadership engagement, and inclusive participation to ensure meaningful outcomes at the community level (Kenikasahmanw et al., 2025). Failure to preserve Tai Dam ethnic identity may erode intangible heritage, weaken social cohesion, and reduce tourism competitiveness (Richards & Du Cros, 2020; Bianchi & de Man, 2021).

Despite the growing literature on sustainable and ethnic tourism, limited research has examined how ethnic identity itself operates as a governance mechanism guiding tourism development and mediating sustainability objectives. This study addresses this gap by examining sustainable tourism as a governance mechanism for ethnic identity preservation in the Tai Dam community in Thailand, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between identity, governance, and sustainable development in heritage tourism contexts.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine how Tai Dam ethnic identity is negotiated and reconfigured within the context of sustainable tourism development in Thailand.
2. To analyze the role of Tai Dam ethnic identity as a governance mechanism shaping sustainable tourism practices aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. To propose strategic policy directions for promoting culturally grounded heritage tourism based on Tai Dam ethnic identity in Thailand.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a governance-oriented perspective to examine sustainable tourism in ethnic minority contexts, conceptualizing ethnic identity as a governance mechanism rather than merely a cultural asset. Drawing on heritage tourism and community governance scholarship, Tai Dam ethnic identity is understood as a dynamic and negotiated set of cultural norms, values, and practices that shape tourism-related decision-making at the community level.

The framework focuses on three key dimensions through which ethnic identity governs tourism development: normative regulation (defining ethical boundaries and appropriate cultural representation), participatory governance (shaping community participation and local control), and cultural-ecological stewardship (guiding the sustainable use of cultural and natural resources). Through these dimensions, ethnic identity mediates power relations between local actors and external stakeholders and influences the alignment of tourism practices with sustainability objectives, including selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Conceptual Framework was shown in Figure 1.

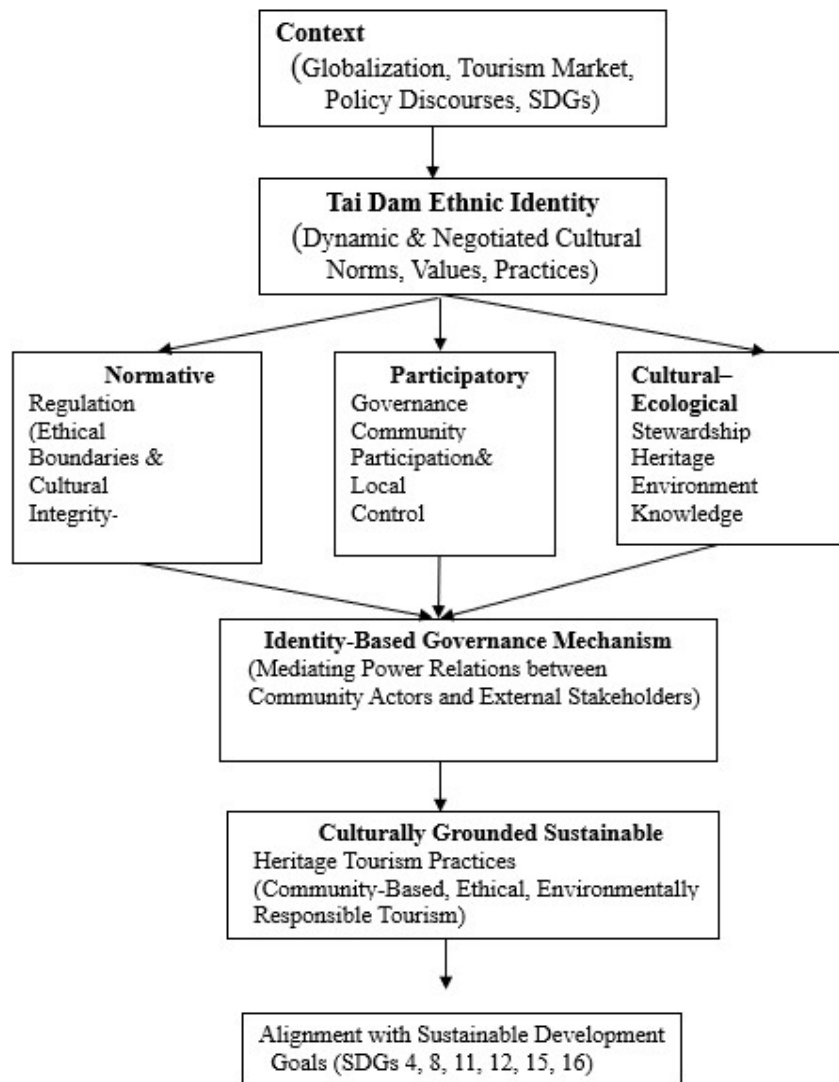


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Tai Dam Ethnic Identity as a Governance Mechanism for Sustainable Heritage Tourism

The figure illustrates how Tai Dam ethnic identity operates as an informal governance mechanism through normative regulation, participatory governance, and cultural-ecological stewardship. These dimensions mediate interactions between community actors and external stakeholders, guiding culturally grounded heritage tourism practices aligned with selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Sustainable Tourism and Ethnic Identity Preservation (Ultra-Concise)

Sustainable tourism seeks to balance economic benefits with social equity, cultural integrity, and environmental protection (UNWTO, 2022). In ethnic and indigenous contexts, it supports livelihoods while safeguarding cultural identity embedded in language, rituals, beliefs, material culture, and collective memory (Timothy, 2022; Salazar & Graburn, 2021). However, market-driven tourism may lead to cultural commodification and selective representation, potentially undermining cultural meanings and community control (Cohen, 2020; Richards & Du Cros, 2020). Consequently, the literature emphasizes culturally sensitive tourism

approaches that prioritize local agency, authenticity, and long-term cultural continuity.

2. Ethnic Identity and Informal Governance in Heritage Tourism

Recent scholarship has highlighted that ethnic identity is more than cultural expression it can operate as an informal governance mechanism influencing tourism decisions and community power relations. Studies show that community identity norms can guide cultural representation and participation in tourism planning (Fan & Li, 2023), and Identity-based management paradigms emphasize community involvement in heritage tourism governance (Timothy, 2022; Boley & Green, 2023). The negotiation of identity through tourism practices has been observed to shape both cultural preservation and stakeholder dynamics, suggesting that ethnic identity plays a regulatory role in sustainable tourism beyond economic functions (Rise, 2025).

3. Community Capacity Development in Sustainable Tourism

Community capacity development is a key pillar of sustainable tourism in ethnic and marginalized contexts, enabling communities to participate actively and benefit from tourism while maintaining cultural integrity (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020). Strengthening local skills, knowledge, and governance capacity supports community control over cultural representation and tourism planning, thereby protecting ethnic identity (Boley & Green, 2023). Empowerment-based tourism models emphasize local ownership, participatory decision-making, and intergenerational knowledge transfer, contributing to cultural resilience and economic sustainability (Scheyvens et al., 2023). Training-based capacity building has also been shown to enhance community skills and understanding related to local economic development (Zafri et al., 2024).

4. Tourism in Border and Marginal Areas (Condensed)

Border and marginal areas often experience geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and socio-economic vulnerability, positioning tourism as both an opportunity and a risk (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). While tourism may generate alternative livelihoods, unregulated development can intensify inequality, cultural erosion, and environmental degradation (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020). In Southeast Asia, ethnic communities in border regions are frequently targeted for cultural tourism despite long-standing marginalization. Sustainable tourism in such contexts requires inclusive governance grounded in local ecological-cultural systems, which is particularly relevant to the Tai Dam community given their historical migration, land use patterns, and cross-border cultural networks (Dolezal & Trupp, 2021).

5. Sustainable Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Tourism aligns with SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), and SDG 12 (Responsible

Consumption) (UNWTO, 2022; United Nations, 2023). In ethnic and marginal communities, SDG-oriented tourism promotes inclusive growth, cultural heritage protection, and responsible resource use (Boley & Green, 2023). However, empirical research on SDG-aligned tourism preserving ethnic identity especially in border and marginal contexts remains limited.

6. Research Gap

While sustainable and ethnic tourism have been studied, little research examines how tourism preserves ethnic identity in marginal areas through SDG frameworks. In Thailand, studies on the Tai Dam are fragmented and mostly descriptive. This study addresses the gap by exploring sustainable tourism as a tool for Tai Dam identity preservation, focusing on community capacity, ecological-cultural context, and SDG alignment, contributing theoretically and practically to sustainable tourism scholarship.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

The study participants consisted of members of the Tai Dam ethnic community in Thailand who are involved in cultural heritage management and community-based tourism activities. Quantitative data were collected from 150 community members using purposive sampling to ensure representation of community leaders, cultural practitioners, tourism entrepreneurs, women, youth, and general residents. Qualitative data were obtained from key informants, including community leaders, local knowledge holders, cultural custodians, and stakeholders engaged in heritage tourism development.

2. Research Instruments

The research instruments consisted of (1) a structured questionnaire designed to collect quantitative data on ethnic identity, community participation, and perceptions of sustainable tourism, and (2) semi-structured interview and focus group discussion guides used to collect qualitative data on changes in ethnic identity, community roles in heritage tourism governance, and cultural conservation practices. The qualitative instruments also incorporated questions aimed at eliciting strategic recommendations and policy-relevant insights from community perspectives in order to address Objective 3. All research instruments were reviewed for content validity by experts in tourism and cultural studies.

3. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in four stages. First, coordination was undertaken with community leaders and local authorities to obtain permission and establish mutual understanding of the research objectives. Second, quantitative data were collected through the administration of questionnaires to selected community members. Third, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key informants. Finally, data completeness was checked, and field notes were recorded to support contextual interpretation.

4. Data Validation

The trustworthiness of qualitative data was ensured through triangulation by comparing data across different sources, methods, and participant groups. Member checking was also conducted with selected participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations.

5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to describe general characteristics and trends of the study variables. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving coding and categorization of recurring themes related to ethnic identity, informal governance, and sustainable heritage tourism. Findings from both data sets were then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

RESULTS

This section presents the research findings in accordance with the three research objectives. The results are derived from the integration of quantitative survey data and qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with members of the Tai Dam community. The presentation follows each research objective sequentially to ensure analytical clarity and coherence.

Results of Objective 1: Dynamics of Change in Tai Dam Ethnic Identity within the Context of Sustainable Tourism

To address Objective 1, both quantitative questionnaires and qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, were employed to examine changes in Tai Dam ethnic identity in relation to tourism development.

1.1 Negotiated Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in Tourism Contexts

Qualitative findings from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions reveal that Tai Dam ethnic identity is continuously negotiated among community members in response to tourism development. This negotiation primarily occurs through collective decision-making regarding which cultural elements can be shared with tourists and which should remain within the private or sacred domain of the community. Elders, cultural custodians, and community leaders play a significant role in setting cultural boundaries, while younger generations contribute perspectives shaped by tourism engagement and economic considerations.

Participants described negotiation as a process of balancing cultural integrity with livelihood opportunities.

One community leader explained:

"We do not show everything to tourists. Some rituals are only for our people, and we discuss together what is appropriate to share."

Several participants emphasized that negotiation also occurs in response to external actors, including tour operators and government agencies. Community members reported that they actively resist tourism practices that conflict with local values.

As one participant stated:

"If tourism activities do not respect our traditions, the community will not accept them, even if they bring income."

These findings demonstrate that ethnic identity functions as a form of informal governance, guiding tourism practices through shared norms, collective agreements, and culturally embedded decision-making processes.

1.2 Reconfigured Ethnic Identity

Findings from both survey data and qualitative interviews indicate that Tai Dam ethnic identity has been reconfigured through its integration into tourism activities. Certain cultural practices, such as traditional performances, festivals, handicrafts, and culinary traditions, have been adapted into structured tourism products and events. While these practices remain rooted in Tai Dam culture, their form, timing, and presentation have been adjusted to meet tourism contexts.

Survey results show that most respondents perceive these changes as adaptation rather than cultural loss. Qualitative data further illustrate that reconfiguration allows the community to sustain cultural visibility and economic benefits while maintaining core cultural meanings.

A community member noted:

"Some traditions are now performed mainly during tourism events, but they still represent who we are as Tai Dam."

However, participants also expressed awareness of the risks associated with over-commercialization. Reconfiguration was therefore described as a deliberate and controlled process rather than an imposed transformation.

As one elder explained:

"We adapt our culture for tourism, but we try to keep its spirit and teach the younger generation the real meaning behind it."

Overall, the findings suggest that Tai Dam ethnic identity is not replaced by tourism but reconfigured in ways that allow cultural continuity, economic participation, and social cohesion to coexist within a sustainable tourism framework.

Results of Objective 2: The Role of Tai Dam Ethnic Identity as a Governance Mechanism Shaping Sustainable Tourism Practices Aligned with the SDGs

To address Objective 2, data were derived from questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus

group discussions to analyze how Tai Dam ethnic identity shapes sustainable tourism practices and functions as a governance mechanism aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2.1 Analysis of the Role of Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in Shaping Sustainable Tourism Practices

Quantitative findings indicate that a majority of respondents perceive Tai Dam ethnic identity as central to guiding tourism practices that emphasize cultural authenticity, community participation, and environmental responsibility. Survey responses reveal strong associations between identity-based tourism and livelihood generation (SDG 8), cultural heritage preservation (SDG 11), responsible production and consumption (SDG 12), and environmental stewardship (SDG 15).

Qualitative findings further demonstrate that ethnic identity influences how tourism activities are designed and implemented. Cultural values, collective memories, and shared norms inform decisions regarding tourism content, visitor behavior, and acceptable forms of cultural representation.

One community member stated:

“Tourism activities must reflect who we are. If they do not follow our values, they cannot continue.”

Participants also highlighted the educational role of tourism in transmitting cultural knowledge, particularly to younger generations, thereby contributing to learning and awareness consistent with SDG 4.

A female participant noted:

“When we explain our culture to visitors, young people also learn from elders and understand their roots.”

These findings suggest that Tai Dam ethnic identity actively shapes sustainable tourism practices by embedding cultural and ethical considerations into tourism operations.

2.2 Tai Dam Ethnic Identity as a Governance Mechanism for Sustainable Tourism

Findings from interviews and focus group discussions reveal that Tai Dam ethnic identity functions as an informal governance mechanism regulating tourism practices at the community level. Rather than relying solely on formal rules or external regulations, tourism activities are governed through shared cultural norms, customary practices, and collective decision-making processes rooted in ethnic identity.

Community leaders and elders play a key role in enforcing these informal governance mechanisms by setting boundaries for cultural use, resolving conflicts, and ensuring that tourism activities align with community values.

One community leader explained:

“Our identity guides how tourism is managed. If an activity goes against our traditions, the community will not support it.”

Participants also emphasized that identity-based governance strengthens social cohesion and ethical accountability, contributing to inclusive and participatory tourism development aligned with SDG 16. Environmental stewardship was frequently cited as an extension of cultural values, with traditional ecological knowledge guiding responsible resource use consistent with SDG 15.

As one participant observed:

“Protecting nature is part of our way of life. Tourism must follow this principle.”

Overall, the findings indicate that Tai Dam ethnic identity operates as a culturally embedded governance mechanism that shapes sustainable tourism practices and aligns local tourism development with multiple SDGs through informal regulation, community participation, and ethical control.

Results of Objective 3: Strategic Policy Directions for Promoting Culturally Grounded Heritage Tourism Based on Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in Thailand

Through multi-stakeholder consultation meetings, the study derived four major policy directions that reflect shared perspectives and negotiated agreements among community members, local authorities, and tourism stakeholders regarding the promotion of culturally grounded heritage tourism based on Tai Dam ethnic identity.

Policy 1: Institutional Recognition of Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in Heritage Tourism Governance

The findings indicate that the formal recognition of Tai Dam ethnic identity is a critical policy foundation for culturally grounded heritage tourism. Community members emphasized that tourism initiatives often fail when cultural norms and values are treated as symbolic rather than authoritative. Participants consistently expressed the need for government agencies and tourism authorities to acknowledge Tai Dam identity as a legitimate guiding framework for tourism planning, zoning, and heritage management. This recognition involves incorporating community-defined cultural principles into official tourism policies and establishing mechanisms through which Tai Dam cultural custodians participate in decision-making processes. Indicators of successful implementation include the presence of identity-based provisions in tourism plans, the formal involvement of Tai Dam representatives in governance structures, and community perceptions that cultural values are respected in tourism development.

Policy 2 Community-Led Cultural Governance for Heritage Tourism Practices

The results reveal that Tai Dam ethnic identity functions as an informal governance mechanism shaping acceptable and unacceptable tourism practices. Cultural norms, customary rules, and collective decision-making processes guide how rituals, festivals, dress, and sacred spaces are presented to visitors. Participants noted that when the community retains authority over cultural

representation, tourism activities are more respectful and sustainable. Effective policy support therefore involves strengthening community-led governance arrangements that allow Tai Dam groups to define cultural boundaries and enforce locally agreed rules. The effectiveness of this approach can be observed through the existence of community-developed cultural guidelines, reduced instances of cultural misrepresentation, and increased community confidence in managing tourism-related cultural issues.

Policy 3 Strengthening Tai Dam Ethnic Identity through Intergenerational Cultural Transmission

The findings highlight intergenerational cultural transmission as a central policy lever for promoting culturally grounded heritage tourism. Elders and youth alike emphasized that tourism can either weaken or reinforce cultural identity depending on how knowledge is transferred. Policies that support cultural learning activities such as storytelling, ritual apprenticeships, and participation in traditional practices enable younger generations to engage meaningfully with their heritage while contributing to tourism interpretation. Successful implementation is reflected in increased youth involvement in cultural tourism roles, sustained cultural knowledge within the community, and the integration of intergenerational learning into heritage tourism experiences.

Policy 4 Integrating Cultural Landscapes into Identity-Based Heritage Tourism Planning

Tai Dam ethnic identity is deeply embedded in relationships with land, water, and the natural environment, making cultural landscapes a key element of heritage tourism policy. The results show that

participants view cultural and ecological elements as inseparable, emphasizing that tourism development must respect both cultural meaning and environmental integrity. Policies that integrate cultural landscapes into tourism planning involve community-informed land-use decisions and the protection of culturally significant sites from overdevelopment. Indicators of policy effectiveness include the preservation of sacred and culturally important landscapes, community satisfaction with environmental stewardship, and the absence of tourism-related ecological degradation.

Policy 5 Aligning Identity-Based Heritage Tourism with Sustainable Development Goals

The final policy direction underscores the importance of aligning Tai Dam identity-based heritage tourism with broader sustainability objectives. Participants emphasized that tourism success should not be measured solely by economic outcomes but also by cultural continuity, social cohesion, and environmental care. Policies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals support balanced development by linking heritage tourism to education, decent livelihoods, cultural preservation, and environmental protection. Evidence of alignment includes the incorporation of SDG-related indicators into tourism evaluation frameworks and community perceptions of improved well-being and cultural sustainability.

The five strategic policy directions identified from the stakeholder consultation process are summarized in Table 1, highlighting their core strengths and expected outcomes for promoting culturally grounded heritage tourism based on Tai Dam ethnic identity.

Table 1: Summary of Strategic Policy Directions for Promoting Culturally Grounded Heritage Tourism

Strategic Policy Direction	Key Strengths	Expected Outcomes
Institutional Recognition of Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in Heritage Tourism Governance	Establishes ethnic identity as a legitimate policy foundation; enhances policy legitimacy through formal recognition of community values	Stronger alignment between tourism policies and Tai Dam cultural norms; increased community trust in tourism governance
Community-Led Cultural Governance for Heritage Tourism Practices	Empowers local communities to regulate cultural representation; utilizes informal governance rooted in customary rules	Reduced cultural commodification; improved cultural integrity and community control over tourism practices
Strengthening Tai Dam Ethnic Identity through Intergenerational Cultural Transmission	Reinforces cultural continuity by linking elders and youth; integrates learning into tourism activities	Sustained transmission of cultural knowledge; increased youth engagement and long-term cultural resilience
Integrating Cultural Landscapes into Identity-Based Heritage Tourism Planning	Recognizes inseparability of culture, land, and ecology; promotes holistic heritage management	Protection of culturally significant landscapes; environmentally responsible tourism development
Aligning Identity-Based Heritage Tourism with Sustainable Development Goals	Connects local identity-based tourism with global sustainability frameworks; balances economic, social, and cultural objectives	Improved community well-being; measurable contributions to SDGs related to culture, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability

Overall, the five policy directions demonstrate that promoting culturally grounded heritage tourism based on Tai Dam ethnic identity requires an integrated approach that combines institutional recognition, community-led governance, cultural transmission, cultural landscape protection, and alignment with sustainability goals. Together, these policies provide a coherent framework for heritage tourism development that is culturally legitimate, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable

DISCUSSION

The discussion is organized in accordance with the three research objectives, with each subsection addressing key findings in relation to the corresponding objective.

Discussion of Objective 1: Dynamics of Change in Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in the Context of Sustainable Tourism

In line with the empirical findings, the discussion of Objective 1 is structured around two interrelated dimensions of change in Tai Dam ethnic identity: (1) negotiated identity and (2) reconfigured identity within the context of sustainable tourism development.

1. Negotiated Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in Tourism Contexts

The findings demonstrate that Tai Dam ethnic identity is actively negotiated through ongoing interactions among community members, tourism stakeholders, and external institutions. Rather than passively responding to tourism pressures, Tai Dam communities engage in collective deliberation to determine which cultural elements may be shared with visitors and which should remain protected. This supports constructivist perspectives on ethnic identity, which conceptualize identity as a social process shaped by dialogue, power relations, and contextual negotiation rather than as a fixed cultural essence (Hall, 2020; Salazar & Graburn, 2021).

This negotiated process is consistent with heritage tourism literature emphasizing community agency and informal governance in managing cultural representation and resisting cultural commodification (Richards & Du Cros, 2020; Timothy, 2022). Similar dynamics are reported by Ajanatorn and Simionica (2025), who demonstrate that Tai Dam communities consciously regulate cultural knowledge circulation to maintain cultural meaning while engaging with tourism and external audiences. From a sustainability perspective, negotiated identity contributes to SDG 16 by strengthening inclusive decision-making and to SDG 11 by supporting culturally legitimate heritage governance.

2. Reconfigured Tai Dam Ethnic Identity through Adaptive Cultural Practices

Beyond negotiation, the findings reveal that Tai Dam ethnic identity is reconfigured through adaptive cultural practices shaped by tourism engagement. Rituals,

narratives, and cultural expressions are selectively reinterpreted to communicate heritage to visitors while retaining core cultural values, reflecting adaptive identity reconfiguration rather than cultural loss (Bianchi & de Man, 2021; Richards, 2022).

This process aligns with Ajanatorn and Simionica (2025), who show that intergenerational knowledge management enables Tai Dam communities to reorganize cultural knowledge for contemporary relevance while sustaining continuity. Such adaptive reconfiguration supports SDG 4 through cultural learning and SDG 8 by enabling culturally grounded tourism livelihoods, reinforcing the role of adaptation as a mechanism of sustainability in heritage tourism.

Summary of Discussion for Objective 1

The discussion confirms that Tai Dam ethnic identity is dynamic rather than static, shaped through ongoing negotiation and reconfiguration in response to sustainable tourism. Community members actively negotiate cultural meanings and boundaries to maintain social cohesion and cultural continuity. At the same time, identity is selectively reconfigured to accommodate tourism demands while retaining symbolic significance. These processes demonstrate community agency in managing cultural change. Overall, Tai Dam ethnic identity functions as a living cultural system that supports heritage preservation and sustainable tourism development.

Discussion of Objective 2 To analyze the role of Tai Dam ethnic identity as a governance mechanism shaping sustainable tourism practices aligned with the SDGs

The findings related to Objective 2 indicate that Tai Dam ethnic identity plays a multifaceted role in shaping sustainable tourism practices, both analytically as an influence on behaviours and decisions, and functionally as an informal governance mechanism guiding community–tourist interactions and tourism outcomes in ways consistent with sustainability objectives.

2.1 Analysis of the Role of Tai Dam Ethnic Identity in Shaping Sustainable Tourism Practices

The study shows that Tai Dam ethnic identity significantly influences how tourism activities are conceptualized and implemented within the community, shaping assumptions about appropriate cultural representation, community participation, and visitor engagement. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that cultural identity actively structures tourism behaviour and meaning-making rather than functioning as a passive cultural backdrop. In heritage tourism contexts, identity-based narratives and values have been shown to influence tourist awareness, sensitivity, and ethical engagement, thereby shaping sustainable tourism practices (Shao et al.; 2025; Suhud et al., 2024). In the Tai Dam context, community members emphasized that culturally embedded norms guide not only internal decision-making but also

expectations of visitor conduct, indicating that ethnic identity co-shapes tourism practices at the host–guest interface.

This analytical role of identity aligns with evidence from heritage and sustainability studies indicating that culturally grounded frameworks enhance authenticity, visitor respect, and long-term destination sustainability (Senathirajah et al., 2023). By embedding Tai Dam identity into tourism interpretation and communication, tourism practices become value-driven rather than market-driven, reinforcing social cohesion and cultural continuity. Such identity-based influence contributes to SDG 11 through culturally legitimate heritage preservation, SDG 12 by encouraging responsible tourism behavior, and SDG 4 by promoting experiential cultural learning for both residents and visitors.

2.2 Tai Dam Ethnic Identity as an Informal Governance Mechanism

Beyond its analytical role, the findings indicate that Tai Dam ethnic identity functions as an informal governance mechanism regulating sustainable tourism practices through shared cultural norms, customary rules, and collective expectations. In contexts where formal tourism governance frameworks are limited or culturally misaligned, identity-based governance emerges as a critical regulatory force. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating that informal institutions and culturally embedded governance systems play a central role in guiding tourism behaviour and ensuring sustainability in heritage and community-based tourism settings (Ajanatom & Simionica, 2025). Within the Tai Dam community, ethnic identity governs tourism through collective decision-making, culturally defined boundaries on cultural performances, and community-enforced codes of conduct. Similar governance dynamics are observed in studies of sustainable tourism policy and governance, which highlight that locally grounded norms can be more effective than formal regulations in shaping ethical tourism behaviour (Scheyvens et al., 2023; Boley & Green, 2023). As one participant noted, “Our traditions themselves tell us what can be shared with tourists and what must remain sacred,” illustrating how identity operates as a normative regulatory framework.

This governance function aligns with interactive governance perspectives in tourism, where sustainability outcomes emerge from shared values and reciprocal responsibilities between hosts and visitors (Suhud et al., 2024). Identity-based governance strengthens local accountability and empowerment, supporting SDG 16 through inclusive and culturally legitimate decision-making and SDG 8 by fostering tourism livelihoods that align with community values. The findings underscore the potential of ethnic identity as a sustainable governance asset in heritage tourism development.

Summary of Discussion for Objective 2

Tai Dam ethnic identity influences sustainable tourism in two interconnected ways: by analytically shaping how practices are understood and valued, and by functioning as an informal governance mechanism that guides norms, behaviour, and tourism outcomes. Both dimensions contribute to heritage sustainability and align with multiple SDGs, underscoring the importance of grounding tourism development in local cultural values and community agency.

Discussion of Objective 3: Strategic Policy Directions for Promoting Culturally Grounded Heritage Tourism

The third objective advances strategic policy directions for promoting culturally grounded heritage tourism based on Tai Dam ethnic identity in Thailand. The five policy directions derived from participatory consultations reflect how ethnic identity can be institutionalized as a foundation for sustainable tourism governance rather than treated merely as a cultural attraction. These findings reinforce recent scholarship emphasizing that effective heritage tourism policy must integrate cultural values, governance mechanisms, and sustainability goals in a coherent framework (Senathirajah et al., 2023).

Strategic tourism policies should incorporate an understanding of local preferences and perceived value to enhance destination attractiveness and sustainability. Research on culinary tourism preferences highlights the importance of integrating service quality, cultural uniqueness, and perceived destination image to drive satisfaction and loyalty among tourists (Pang et al., 2025; Tunjungsari et al., 2025).

First, policies emphasizing identity-based cultural governance align with research showing that culturally embedded norms function as effective regulatory mechanisms in heritage tourism contexts. Studies on tourist citizenship behavior demonstrate that sustainability outcomes improve when tourism policies are grounded in local values and ethical expectations shared by hosts and visitors (Suhud et al., 2024). This supports the study’s finding that Tai Dam identity can serve as a normative policy anchor guiding culturally respectful tourism development.

Second, policies promoting community-led knowledge management and cultural transmission correspond with evidence that safeguarding intangible heritage requires institutional support for intergenerational learning and controlled knowledge circulation. Ajanatom and Simionica (2025) highlight that strategic management of cultural knowledge strengthens identity continuity while enabling adaptive engagement with tourism, confirming the relevance of such policy directions for Tai Dam heritage tourism.

Third, policies focusing on inclusive governance and stakeholder participation are consistent with studies indicating that locally grounded governance frameworks enhance legitimacy and long-term sustainability in heritage tourism. Research in sustainable tourism governance emphasizes that policy effectiveness increases when communities act as co-

governors rather than policy recipients (Scheyvens et al., 2023; Boley & Green, 2023). This supports the study's emphasis on participatory, culturally grounded policy mechanisms.

Fourth, policies that integrate education, cultural interpretation, and ethical tourism practices are consistent with evidence that learning-oriented heritage tourism fosters mutual respect, responsible visitor behaviour, and long-term conservation outcomes. Research in heritage and sustainability tourism demonstrates that culturally informed interpretation enhances visitor understanding while reinforcing conservation ethics, thereby contributing directly to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (Khan et al., 2026; Suhud et al., 2024; Damrongsiri et al., 2022).

Beyond cultural preservation, the findings indicate that sustainable tourism policies for Tai Dam heritage must incorporate strategic economic capacity-building within the community. Strengthening local entrepreneurial orientation and competitive advantage emerges as a critical policy pathway for enhancing tourism resilience and sustainability. This is supported by evidence from disruption-prone tourism contexts, such as Nepal, where competitive advantage mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and tourism firm performance, underscoring the importance of strategic capabilities in sustaining tourism development (Bhandari et al., 2023). In the Tai Dam context, integrating identity-based governance with policies that support community entrepreneurship enables culturally grounded tourism enterprises to remain adaptive while preserving ethnic values, thereby reinforcing SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

In addition, strategic tourism policies should incorporate destination branding and competitiveness as core elements of long-term sustainability. Evidence from the Malaysian context shows that strategic drivers of sustainable tourism destination brand equity such as perceived quality, destination image, and stakeholder collaboration enhance tourism performance and community benefits (Feng & Yong, 2026; Fan et al., 2025). This highlights the importance of aligning cultural identity with destination competitiveness in the design of heritage tourism policies.

Finally, policies that support adaptive and future-oriented heritage tourism strategies, including digital tools and strategic planning, are consistent with global trends in sustainable tourism development. Bibliometric analyses reveal an increasing emphasis on policy integration, digital transformation, and sustainability as key directions shaping heritage tourism worldwide (Senathirajah et al., 2023). Embedding Tai Dam ethnic identity within these strategic frameworks ensures that tourism development remains culturally legitimate while remaining responsive to contemporary economic, technological, and sustainability challenges.

Summary of Discussion for Objective 3

The discussion highlights that promoting culturally grounded heritage tourism requires strategic policies rooted in Tai Dam ethnic identity. The five policy directions demonstrate how identity-based governance supports cultural legitimacy, community participation, and sustainability. Aligning these strategies with the SDGs strengthens heritage preservation and inclusive tourism development in Thailand.

Overall, the discussion confirms that the five policy directions proposed in this study are theoretically grounded, empirically supported, and aligned with international heritage tourism scholarship. By positioning Tai Dam ethnic identity as the core of strategic policy-making, these directions contribute to SDG 8 (inclusive economic growth), SDG 11 (heritage preservation), SDG 12 (responsible tourism), and SDG 16 (inclusive institutions), reinforcing the role of culturally grounded governance in sustainable heritage tourism development in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Tai Dam ethnic identity plays a dynamic and strategic role in sustainable heritage tourism development in Thailand. The findings show that ethnic identity is continuously negotiated and adaptively reconfigured through tourism engagement, while also functioning as an informal governance mechanism that shapes culturally appropriate and SDG-aligned tourism practices. Building on these insights, the study proposes strategic policy directions that position Tai Dam identity as a foundation for culturally grounded heritage tourism, strengthening community participation, cultural continuity, and sustainable livelihoods. By integrating cultural identity, governance, and sustainability, this research contributes directly to the aims of heritage tourism scholarship by advancing understanding of how culturally embedded governance can support inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Policy Recommendations

Policymakers should integrate Tai Dam ethnic identity into heritage tourism policies as a governance foundation rather than a symbolic resource. National and local tourism authorities are encouraged to support identity-based governance mechanisms, participatory decision-making, and culturally grounded tourism standards that align with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 8, 11, 12, and 16.

2. Practical Recommendations

Tourism practitioners and community stakeholders should apply culturally grounded practices by embedding Tai Dam values into tourism interpretation, visitor guidelines, and community-led management structures. Strengthening local capacity in cultural interpretation, ethical tourism practices, and community

coordination will enhance sustainable heritage tourism outcomes.

3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should explore comparative analyses across different ethnic communities and heritage contexts to examine the transferability of identity-based governance models. Longitudinal research is also recommended to assess how negotiated and reconfigured ethnic identities evolve over time under sustained tourism development.

Declarations

Availability of Data and Material

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations related to participant confidentiality and community sensitivity. However, anonymized data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with permission from the relevant community representatives.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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