



Managing the ideological heritage of Tran Nhan Tong from the approach of intangible cultural heritage

Vo Vuong Quoc¹, M A Bui Thi Thu²

¹ Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Vietnam

² Faculty of Music, Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Vietnam

Abstract

In the context of many cultural and spiritual spaces in Vietnam being invested in, restored, and exploited in conjunction with tourism, heritage management cannot stop at preserving relics, maintaining festivals, or organizing superficial activities, but must aim at managing the spiritual values that constitute the heritage. The case of Tran Nhan Tong's thought clearly demonstrates this requirement. As a king, thinker, and founder of the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect, he left behind a system of values with lasting significance for national culture, exemplified by the concepts of "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma," "harmonizing with the world," "engagement with the world," and the connection between personal cultivation and social responsibility. However, currently, these values are mainly promoted through festivals, education, media, pilgrimages, and spiritual tourism, but are not yet managed as a content object with its own structure. Approaching intangible cultural heritage, this article clarifies the basis for identifying Tran Nhan Tong's thought as a living spiritual heritage, while analyzing its current state and proposing appropriate management directions.

Keywords: Tran Nhan Tong, ideological heritage, intangible cultural heritage, cultural management, Yen Tu, Tay Yen Tu

Introduction

In recent years, along with socio-economic development, many cultural and spiritual spaces in Vietnam have been restored, organized for exploitation, and linked to tourism development. This process contributes to expanding access to heritage in contemporary life, while also creating additional resources for promoting the local image and developing the cultural economy. However, from a cultural management perspective, practice also reveals a paradox: while the external manifestations of heritage such as relics, festivals, sightseeing activities, pilgrimages, and destination communication are strongly emphasized, the ideological value—the element that creates the depth and identity of the heritage—has not been recognized and managed accordingly. This is a significant gap in current heritage management.

This viewpoint aligns with the assessment of many scholars that preserving and promoting heritage cannot stop at the form of expression but must delve into the content and value of the heritage. Bui Hoai Son argues that cultural management must be linked to the orientation of community values and the organization of the environment so that values are maintained and promoted in social life (Bui Hoai Son, 2017^[2], pp. 24-25). Meanwhile, Laurajane Smith emphasizes that heritage values do not exist as fixed qualities of the object, but are formed through social interpretation and practice (Smith, 2006)^[9].

The case of Tran Nhan Tong is a typical example. He was not only a king who made great contributions to the cause of national defense, but also the founder of the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect, leaving behind a system of ideological values that profoundly influenced Vietnamese culture. Values such as "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma," "harmonizing with the world," the spirit of engagement with the world, and the harmony between personal life and social responsibility have been affirmed by many studies as enduring values of the national intellectual tradition

(Nguyen Lang, 2012^[5], pp. 210, 302-305; Le Manh That, 2020, pp. 112-118; Nguyen Tai Thu, 2019^[6], p. 125). However, in contemporary life, these values are often conveyed indirectly through festivals, explanations, religious activities, education, and cultural-spiritual tourism, while the management of ideological content as a central component of heritage remains limited. This research direction also coincides with the objective established by this thesis: to clarify the scientific and practical basis for managing the intellectual heritage of Tran Nhan Tong, based on approaching it as a content object in cultural management. From an approach to intangible cultural heritage, the issue arises that Tran Nhan Tong's thought should not be viewed merely as a system of historical or philosophical concepts, but rather as a system of values that has been accepted, recreated, and transmitted by the community within specific cultural spaces. The 2003^[12] UNESCO Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that are recognized by the community and continuously recreated in social life (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 2-3). If this understanding is applied, Tran Nhan Tong's thought can be identified as a form of living spiritual heritage, present in cultural practices associated with Yen Tu, Tay Yen Tu, and the broader Truc Lam space.

Therefore, this article focuses on clarifying three main points: firstly, the theoretical basis for identifying Tran Nhan Tong's thought as a form of intangible cultural heritage; Secondly, the current state of management of this intellectual heritage in the present context; and thirdly, some orientations and solutions for management that shift the focus from managing forms of expression to managing the content of its value.

Theoretical basis and methodological approach

In contemporary heritage science, intangible cultural heritage is no longer understood as a remnant of the past,

but rather as a living cultural process, existing through community, practice, and transmission. This approach shifts the focus from "heritage carriers" to "the social mechanisms of heritage." Many scholars have pointed out that heritage value does not exist as an immutable quality within the object itself, but is formed and strengthened through interpretation, practice, and community recognition (Smith, 2006; Smith & Akagawa, 2008) ^[9, 10]. In Vietnam, Tran Ngoc Them and Ngo Duc Thinh also emphasize that heritage is a dynamic cultural process, linked to community life and social practices (Tran Ngoc Them, 2016; Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010) ^[4, 11].

From that foundation, this article uses the concept of "ideological heritage" as an operational concept. According to this understanding, intellectual heritage is not the entire ideology of a historical figure, but rather the intellectual values that have transcended their original context of origin to be accepted, practiced, and transmitted by the community as a sustainable guiding structure in social life. In other words, ideology is the starting point, intellectual values are the result of the process of social selection and acceptance, and intellectual heritage is the enduring state of existence of those values when they have been embodied in cultural practice and still have the ability to influence the present. This concept is also consistent with the research orientation of the thesis when establishing the subject as "the intellectual heritage of Tran Nhan Tong" with a multi-layered structure including value content, transmission forms, and social practice.

From a cultural management perspective, this article is based on the concept that cultural management is not merely the management of activities or institutions, but rather the process of orienting, regulating, and organizing the environment so that cultural values are maintained, promoted, and recreated in society (Phan Hong Giang & Bui Hoai Son, 2014; Bui Hoai Son, 2017) ^[2, 7]. With ideological heritage, this is even clearer because the object of management is not a tangible object, but a core value system embodied through festivals, rituals, education, media, tourism, and community activities. Therefore, managing ideological heritage requires simultaneously influencing the content of its values, the methods of transmission, and the environment in which it is practiced.

In terms of methodology, the study uses an interdisciplinary approach of cultural management science, combining analysis and synthesis of documents, a value-based approach, a systems approach, field observation, case studies, and policy analysis. The research scope is defined in representative spaces associated with Truc Lam, such as Yen Tu and Tay Yen Tu; the research period covers the years from after 1986 to the present. The thesis itself clearly states that the selection of Yen Tu and Tay Yen Tu is not random, but reflects the cultural and historical spatial system associated with the formation, dissemination, and transformation of Tran Nhan Tong's thought in different contexts.

The ideology of Tran Nhan Tong as a form of intangible cultural heritage.

The first condition for an ideology to be considered intangible cultural heritage is that it must transcend the realm of individual perception to become a value recognized by the community. This is clearly demonstrated with Tran Nhan Tong. The ideas he left behind are not limited to his writings or the realm of Buddhism, but have entered the

national cultural memory as meaningful and enduring guidelines: living in the world while upholding morality, integrating without assimilating, cultivating inner peace while fulfilling social responsibility, and harmoniously combining worldly and spiritual life, individual and community. It is this enduring and communal nature that makes Tran Nhan Tong's ideology not merely "historical thought," but can be seen as a "living value" of Vietnamese culture.

The second condition is that these values must be embodied in identifiable cultural forms. In reality, Tran Nhan Tong's ideology is present in the spaces of Yen Tu and Tay Yen Tu; This is reflected in the system of temples, monasteries, pilgrimage routes, festivals, Buddhist activities, media discourse, traditional education, and cultural-spiritual tourism products. In other words, this ideology has been transformed into socio-cultural practices. This characteristic is very close to how UNESCO views intangible heritage as a "living heritage," existing within the community context, passed down through generations, and constantly being recreated in present life (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 2-3).

The third condition is that this value system must still have the capacity to guide the present. Not every historical ideology becomes heritage. Only those ideologies that remain relevant to life today can continue to be maintained by the community. In this case, the ideological values of Tran Nhan Tong, such as humanism, tolerance, engagement with the world, social responsibility, and harmony between the individual and the community, can still be applied in moral education, building a cultural environment, organizing festivals, religious activities, and cultural-spiritual tourism. This forms the basis for viewing the ideological heritage not as "historical remnants," but as a cultural resource capable of participating in contemporary social life.

However, approaching ideology as intangible cultural heritage also requires a clear distinction between the content of its value and the means of conveying that value. Pagodas, texts, festivals, media products, or tourism activities are not the ideological heritage itself, but rather its embodiment and transmission forms. Therefore, managing ideological heritage cannot stop at managing the carrier or activities, but must focus on managing how the value is interpreted, standardized, disseminated, and practiced. This is the key point between the conventional approach to heritage and the approach to ideological heritage from a cultural management perspective..

The current state of management of the intellectual heritage of Tran Nhan Tong

Surveys from this thesis show that current management of spaces associated with Tran Nhan Tong has achieved some positive results. The system of relics, temples, pagodas, pilgrimage routes, and cultural spaces related to Truc Lam has received investment; festival, religious, media, and tourism activities have developed strongly; and the participation of state management agencies, the Church, the community, and businesses is becoming increasingly evident. This shows that the intellectual legacy of Tran Nhan Tong has not been forgotten, but is quite prominent in contemporary cultural life. However, if we consider only the management of its value content, many shortcomings remain.

Firstly, current management still focuses more on the outward manifestation than the inner substance. Many

activities concentrate on preserving relics, organizing festivals, beautifying spaces, developing tourism, and promoting destinations; While the identification of the core values of Tran Nhan Tong's thought as a basis for education, communication, interpretation, and evaluation of its effectiveness has not been synchronized, the consequence is that the heritage is promoted broadly but not necessarily deeply in terms of its ideological depth. This is also the issue that the thesis identifies as the gap between "value content" and "form of expression" in current heritage management practices.

Secondly, communication about Tran Nhan Tong and Yen Tu - Tay Yen Tu is not lacking in information, but it is still simplistic in content. Official information portals and media products often focus on promoting destinations, festivals, pilgrimages, and tourism, while the explanation of the ideology often stops at general phrases such as "Buddha Emperor," "Truc Lam," "harmony," "humanism," and "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma," and has not been developed into a structured content system. Therefore, the biggest limitation of current media is not necessarily serious distortion, but rather the lack of content standards and the lack of tools to assess the quality of ideological communication.

Thirdly, in the field of cultural and spiritual tourism, although this is a channel with a large social reach, the integration of ideological content into the tourism experience is still limited. If participants mainly access heritage through landscapes, rituals, pilgrimages, and services, without being guided into the depth of thought, then ideological heritage is easily relegated to a supporting role for tourism activities. This issue further highlights the need for a set of evaluation criteria based not only on the number of visitors or revenue, but also on the extent to which ideological values are accurately and fully reflected in promotional activities.

Fourth, regarding management tools, although new legal systems such as the 2024 Law on Cultural Heritage, Decree No. 308/2025/ND-CP, and related documents have created an important legal framework for managing heritage and religious activities, these documents are still mainly designed according to heritage types and forms of expression, and have not separated "ideological heritage" as a group of content requiring standardization, assessment, and evaluation using separate criteria. As the thesis points out, the issue of "lack of specialized policies" does not mean there are no relevant documents, but rather that there is no document that directly identifies the ideological values of Tran Nhan Tong as an independent content management object with its own identification criteria, output standards, assessment mechanisms, and inspection tools.

Overall, the current situation shows that the intellectual legacy of Tran Nhan Tong is strongly present in cultural life, but the capacity to manage the valuable content of this legacy has not developed proportionally. This is the basis for proposing a new management orientation, focusing on the valuable content.

Management orientation and solutions

From an intangible cultural heritage perspective, the management of Tran Nhan Tong's ideological heritage should be based on the principle of protecting core values while promoting them through appropriate practices. In this spirit, it is first necessary to research, identify, and standardize the core values of Tran Nhan Tong's thought.

Standardization here does not mean rigidly framing the issue, but rather building a reliable common content platform for education, communication, interpretation, festivals, and tourism. Only with this foundation can promotion avoid a situation where everyone talks about Tran Nhan Tong but inconsistencies or a focus on symbolism rather than substance.

Next, an effective coordination mechanism needs to be established among relevant stakeholders. State management agencies play a policy-directing and coordinating role; the Buddhist Church and monastic institutions have the advantage of ensuring ideological depth; researchers contribute to academic standardization; the community maintains the practice environment; and businesses help expand social accessibility. Effective management is not about replacing each other's roles, but about connecting these entities within a stable coordination mechanism, sharing common content standards and common goals for protecting and promoting the ideological heritage.

Another important solution is to build shared learning materials and databases on Tran Nhan Tong and Truc Lam. The thesis emphasizes that the 2024 Law on Cultural Heritage stipulates the responsibility for researching, collecting, and documenting intangible cultural heritage; at the same time, the dissemination, promotion, and education of traditions through heritage can be carried out in various forms such as scientific conferences, exhibitions, study tours, and the compilation and publication of specialized documents. In addition, the program for digitizing Vietnamese cultural heritage in the period 2021-2030 and Decree No. 308/2025/ND-CP provide further legal basis for the synchronized implementation of these activities. This is a crucial foundation for developing standardized learning materials and digital databases to support the management of ideological heritage.

In addition, it is necessary to establish a set of criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of protecting and promoting ideological heritage. This set of criteria should include indicators such as: the degree of correct identification of core values; the degree of integration of ideological content into programs, products, and activities; the effectiveness of public reception; the quality of coordination among stakeholders; and the ability to limit simplified or deviant expressions. With evaluation criteria in place, management can shift from subjective to well-founded, from superficial to in-depth management.

Finally, the PDCA cycle should be applied in management to create a process of continuous improvement: planning, organizing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting policies. For a living heritage like ideological heritage, this is a suitable approach to adapt to the changes in contemporary social life. The thesis itself clearly identifies one of the research tasks as developing a system of criteria for evaluating management effectiveness and proposing feasible management models and tools.

Conclusions

Approaching Tran Nhan Tong's thought from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage allows for a broader scope of research and cultural management of a class of spiritual values that has long been viewed primarily from the perspective of intellectual history or Buddhism. Through this approach, it can be affirmed that Tran Nhan Tong's thought is not merely a system of ideas of a historical figure, but a system of values that has been

accepted by the community, embodied in cultural practices, and capable of guiding contemporary life. Therefore, it can be identified as a unique form of intangible cultural heritage.

However, current practice shows that the management of this intellectual heritage still focuses on managing space, activities, and forms of expression, while the content of its values has not been standardized and controlled accordingly. Therefore, the appropriate management approach is to shift from "managing the manifestation of heritage" to "managing the value structure of heritage," through content standardization, enhanced inter-stakeholder coordination, the development of shared learning materials and databases, the establishment of evaluation criteria, and the application of the PDCA cycle in management. This approach is not only significant for the case of Tran Nhan Tong, but also suggests directions for research and management of many other forms of spiritual heritage in Vietnam today.

References

1. Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW dated June 9, 2014 on building and developing Vietnamese culture and people to meet the requirements of sustainable national development, 2014.
2. Bui HS. Managing Vietnamese culture in the process of renovation and international integration. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2017.
3. Le MT. Complete Works of Tran Nhan Tong. Hanoi: Hong Duc Publishing House, 2020.
4. Ngo DT. Preserving, enriching and promoting traditional Vietnamese cultural values in renovation and integration. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2010.
5. Nguyen L. A Historical Essay on Vietnamese Buddhism. Ho Chi Minh City: Phuong Dong Publishing House, 2012.
6. Nguyen TT. History of Vietnamese Thought. Hanoi: National University of Hanoi Publishing House, 2019.
7. Phan HG, Bui HS. Managing Vietnamese culture in the process of renovation and international integration. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2014.
8. National Assembly. Law on Cultural Heritage No. 45/2024/QH15. Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2024.
9. Smith L. Uses of Heritage. London: Routledge, 2006.
10. Smith L, Akagawa N, editors. Intangible Heritage. London - New York: Routledge, 2008.
11. Tran NT. Vietnamese Value System from Tradition to Modernity and the Path to the Future. Hanoi: Culture and Arts Publishing House, 2016.
12. UNESCO. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Paris: UNESCO, 2003.