



Preserving and Promoting Tangible Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Urban Development in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Tangible cultural heritage constitutes a vital component of the national cultural legacy, embodied in material forms such as historical-cultural relics, architectural works, heritage spaces, artifacts, antiquities, and national treasures. These assets reflect the historical trajectory, cultural identity, and developmental level of communities. In the context of rapid urbanization and expanding urban governance, the preservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City are encountering new pressures and challenges. This article analyzes and evaluates the current state of heritage preservation and promotion from the perspective of urban heritage management. It identifies key achievements, existing limitations, and emerging issues in the process of safeguarding and valorizing heritage assets. On that basis, the paper proposes several policy and management solutions aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of tangible cultural heritage preservation in alignment with the goals of sustainable urban development in Ho Chi Minh City

INTRODUCTION

Tangible cultural heritage constitutes an important component of the national cultural heritage, existing in specific material forms such as historical and cultural relics, architectural works, spaces bearing historical value, artifacts, antiquities, and national treasures. Through these material forms, tangible cultural heritage reflects the historical process, cultural identity, and level of development of a community, while also playing a significant role in preserving historical memory and the cultural foundations of society.

Ho Chi Minh City is a major economic and cultural center of Vietnam, as well as a space where multiple layers of historical and cultural accumulation converge and interact. Throughout the processes of land reclamation, construction, and rapid urbanization, the city has formed a rich system of tangible cultural heritage associated with revolutionary history, urban architecture, and the religious and belief practices of its communities. However, in the context of rapid urbanization, the development of the market economy, and the expansion of urban space, tangible cultural heritage is increasingly subject to pressure from infrastructure development, changes in land use patterns, and trends toward economic exploitation. These dynamics heighten the risk of degradation in both the values and integrity of heritage sites. This reality underscores the need for an objective and systematic examination of the current state of tangible cultural heritage preservation and promotion under contemporary conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on this context, the present study focuses on analyzing and assessing the current situation of preserving and promoting tangible cultural heritage values in Ho Chi Minh City, drawing on state management data and local implementation practices. By clarifying the achievements attained, the limitations encountered, and the issues arising in practice, the article aims to provide an empirical basis for improving policy frameworks and enhancing the effectiveness of tangible cultural heritage management in Ho Chi Minh City in the coming period, in line with the goal of sustainable urban development.

METHODOLOGY

This study approaches the issue of preserving and promoting tangible cultural heritage values in Ho Chi Minh City based on the methodology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Within this framework, the preservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage are examined in relation to socio economic conditions, the process of urbanization, and the requirements of sustainable urban development.

In addition, the article employs several other research methods, primarily analysis-synthesis and the historical - logical method, to clarify the current state of tangible cultural heritage preservation and promotion within the urban context. The study also applies policy document analysis, along with comparative and generalization methods, to assess the achievements attained, the limitations encountered, and the issues emerging in contemporary practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the System of Tangible Cultural Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City

Based on the approach stipulated in Law No. 45/2024/QH15 of the National Assembly – the Law on Cultural Heritage, cultural heritage is classified into intangible cultural heritage and tangible cultural heritage. This study focuses on tangible cultural heritage as heritage existing in concrete material forms that embody historical, cultural, and scientific values, including historical-cultural relics, architectural works, historically valuable spaces, artifacts, antiques, and national treasures. This conceptual framework is consistently applied throughout the identification, analysis, and evaluation of the current state of preservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City.

As a special class city and a major economic and cultural center of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City has experienced rapid urbanization, administrative expansion, and increasing development pressures, all of which have directly affected its system of tangible cultural heritage. Profound transformations in urban space and growing demands for land exploitation necessitate an examination of heritage preservation and promotion in close relation to sustainable urban development.

Over more than three centuries of formation and development, Ho Chi Minh City has accumulated a rich system of tangible cultural heritage that vividly reflects the process of southern land reclamation, urban construction, and cultural interaction and acculturation. Characterized as an open city with ethnic diversity, religious plurality, and early integration into external cultural flows, the City's tangible cultural heritage bears strong imprints of Southern Vietnamese culture while also embodying the convergence of national traditions and international influences. This combination has shaped a distinctive tangible cultural landscape of a major metropolitan area.

A prominent component of Ho Chi Minh City's tangible cultural heritage system consists of historical-revolutionary relics and traditional architectural sites closely associated with the struggle for national liberation and the formation and development of the city. Sites such as Nha Rong Wharf, the Independence Palace, the Cu Chi Tunnels, and the Can Gio Mangrove Forest not only commemorate significant historical events and spaces but also crystallize collective memory, materializing core values such as patriotism, the spirit of independence, resilience, and creativity of the Southern Vietnamese people. Through their tangible presence within the urban space, these relics play an essential role in historical preservation, tradition education, and the reinforcement of the City's cultural identity. In addition, religious, belief related, and historic urban architectural structures constitute a highly dense and diverse group of tangible cultural heritage.

Communal houses, pagodas, temples, assembly halls, churches, mosques, and folk belief establishments clearly reflect the rich spiritual life, patterns of communal coexistence, and cultural syncretism of Southern urban residents. Meanwhile, urban architectural works formed during the late modern and modern periods such as the Municipal Theatre, the Saigon Central Post Office, Ben Thanh Market, and the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts demonstrate a harmonious acculturation between Western architectural styles and indigenous elements. These works contribute to shaping the distinctive architectural identity of Ho Chi Minh City as a modern city that remains deeply rooted in traditional cultural foundations.

Alongside monuments and architectural works, archaeological objects, historical-cultural artifacts, and traditional household items represent direct manifestations of tangible cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City.

Through these materials, it is possible to identify the long term human settlement process in the Southern region from prehistoric to late modern periods, as well as characteristics of daily life, labor, belief systems, and community relations of Saigon-Gia Dinh residents. These artifacts are currently preserved primarily within the City's museum system, thereby contributing to the materialization, conservation, and dissemination of traditional cultural values in contemporary social life.

Overall, the system of tangible cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City has been formed through multiple historical layers, exists in diverse forms, and is closely embedded within the urban space. These heritages are not merely vestiges of the past but constitute an important historical-cultural foundation, providing both scientific and practical bases for analyzing the current state of preservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage values in Ho Chi Minh City in the present context.

Current Situation of the Preservation and Promotion of Tangible Cultural Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City

1. First, the Current State of Tangible Cultural Heritage Preservation in Ho Chi Minh City

In recent years, the preservation of tangible cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City has shown notable positive developments, associated with the growing awareness of authorities at various levels regarding the role of heritage in sustainable urban development. As a special class city and a major economic and cultural center of the country, Ho Chi Minh City currently manages a very large volume of tangible cultural heritage, characterized by diverse types, wide spatial distribution, and direct exposure to the impacts of rapid urbanization.

According to reports from the Department of Culture and Sports, as of June 2025, Ho Chi Minh City had 200 ranked historical cultural relics, including two special national relics, 58 national relics, and 140 city level relics. Following administrative boundary adjustments, territorial expansion, and the merger of Binh Duong and Ba Ria-Vung Tau areas, the scale of the heritage system has increased significantly. At present, the City manages a total of 321 ranked relics, comprising four special national relics, 99 national relics, and 218 provincial/city level relics, distributed across Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, and Ba Ria-Vung Tau (Department of Culture and Sports, 2025, p. 3). This scale reflects the substantial volume of tangible heritage under management while simultaneously imposing increasing demands on heritage governance and preservation in the context of an expanded urban space.

Regarding preservation activities, inventorying, scientific documentation, and relic ranking have been implemented in a relatively systematic manner, thereby establishing a legal basis for defining protection zones and formulating management plans. The City has also focused on preparing dossiers for special national relics and orienting efforts toward the nomination of world heritage sites, while initially developing several heritage based tourism products, such as night tours at Bach Dinh and the Con Dao Prison complex.

In terms of restoration and conservation, projects have generally been carried out in accordance with regulations, with an emphasis on preserving original values while serving the purposes of tradition education and cultural tourism development. Numerous restoration projects have been implemented and completed, with total funding of approximately VND 500 billion from the state budget and socialized sources (Department of Culture and Sports, 2025, p. 3). However, due to the large number of relics, their wide distribution, and uneven preservation conditions, a portion of sites particularly religious and belief related relics and those under community or private ownership remain in prolonged states of deterioration.

Beyond the system of ranked relics, the preservation of religious, belief related, and historic urban architectural works continues to face significant challenges. Some urban planning schemes and urban renewal programs have begun to incorporate heritage protection requirements through the delineation of protection zones and the control of surrounding construction spaces for selected representative structures. Nevertheless, the majority of architectural works with traditional cultural value have not yet been formally ranked as relics, resulting in insufficient legal protection against pressures from renovation, vertical expansion, and functional conversion during rapid urban development, especially in inner city areas. In practice, there remain approximately 231 structures and sites of cultural value that have not been officially ranked, creating substantial difficulties for protection and management efforts.

With regard to archaeological artifacts, historical-cultural objects, and traditional household items, preservation is currently carried out primarily through the museum system and specialized storage facilities. Activities related to collection, inventorying, conservation, and restoration have received increased attention in recent years, contributing to the strengthening of the City's material documentary foundation of history and culture. However, disparities in preservation conditions, professional capacity, and investment resources among storage institutions remain a pressing issue, adversely affecting the long term effectiveness of conservation efforts.

Overall, the current state of tangible cultural heritage preservation in Ho Chi Minh City demonstrates clear efforts to expand the scope of heritage identification, improve legal frameworks, and increase investment in conservation. At the same time, practical implementation reveals numerous challenges arising from urbanization pressures, the expansion of management scale, and limitations in resources and coordination mechanisms. These issues necessitate continued resolution in close connection with the requirement to effectively promote heritage values in the contemporary urban context.

2. Second, the Current Situation of Promoting Tangible Cultural Heritage Values in Ho Chi Minh City

Alongside preservation efforts, the promotion of tangible cultural heritage values in Ho Chi Minh City in recent years has been implemented through increasingly diversified approaches, linking heritage with contemporary life, tradition education, and the development of urban culture. In the context of rapid urbanization and the expansion of the city's management space, tangible cultural heritage has not only been regarded as an object requiring protection but has gradually been mobilized as a resource serving the City's sustainable development goals.

Regarding achievements, the museum system and cultural institutions continue to serve as the primary channels for heritage promotion. As of 2025, Ho Chi Minh City has 23 museums (11 public and 12 non public), preserving 23 national treasures. Notably, among the museums under the Department of Culture and Sports, 7 out of 9 are classified as Grade I museums, accounting for 38.8% of all Grade I museums nationwide (Department of Culture and Sports, 2025, pp. 2-3). On this basis, professional activities have been strengthened toward greater specialization, with increased emphasis on in depth collection, upgraded conservation and restoration equipment, and the gradual development of a shared database alongside the operation of the "Ho Chi Minh City Museum and Heritage" management software. In parallel with digital transformation, several museums have introduced 3D exhibitions, audio guides, interactive screens, robotic guides, and enhanced communication via digital platforms, thereby expanding public access, particularly among younger audiences.

Heritage education has been promoted through cooperative programs between museums and schools, implemented via models such as "History Lessons at Museums," "I Love History," and "Local History Classes." Thanks to innovations in content and modes of engagement, the total number of museum visitors in 2025 reached over 4.46 million, representing a 40% increase compared

to 2024. During the same year, 189 exhibitions and displays were organized, including numerous large scale and high quality thematic exhibitions, notably *National Treasures – Masterpieces of Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City* (Department of Culture and Sports, 2025, p. 2).

At the same time, linking heritage promotion with cultural tourism and the urban cultural economy has yielded initial positive results. Many relics, representative architectural works, and historic urban spaces have been incorporated into inner city tours and thematic tourism programs, contributing to enhanced public recognition of heritage values. In addition, international cooperation and socialization efforts have achieved notable outcomes through projects such as FSPI (France) and USAID (United States), as well as participation in the 27th General Conference of ICOM. The system of non public museums has continued to expand, with 12 museums welcoming approximately 85,000 visitors, thereby diversifying museum models and contributing to the promotion of tangible cultural heritage values (Department of Culture and Sports, 2025, p. 2).

Overall, research findings indicate that the preservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage values in Ho Chi Minh City in recent years have experienced positive transformations. These are reflected in the expanded scope of heritage inventories, the increased number of ranked relics, enhanced investment in restoration, and, notably, the diversification of heritage promotion through museums, education, tourism, and digital transformation.

However, alongside these achievements, heritage promotion activities continue to reveal several notable limitations. First, heritage education remains concentrated primarily within the public museum sector; stable, city wide coordination mechanisms among museums, heritage sites, and schools have yet to be firmly institutionalized. As a result, many activities still depend heavily on the capacity and financial conditions of individual units, limiting their dissemination into school environments and the broader community. Second, heritage promotion through tourism remains largely organized around isolated “destination based” models, lacking integrated product chains and depth in content (narratives, interpretation, and experiential components). Consequently, the value added generated from heritage remains limited, and spillover effects across different urban areas are uneven. Third, although digital transformation has opened new avenues for public engagement, the level of application remains highly uneven: many small scale museums and heritage sites lack sufficient human and financial resources, resulting in limited implementation and an unequal impact across the overall system.

In particular, a structural “bottleneck” directly affecting heritage promotion lies in the group of historic urban architectural works located in the central area. Within the City’s current heritage inventory, there are 231 structures and sites that have not yet been officially ranked, many of which are situated in central “golden land” locations with high commercial value, and in some cases fall under the management of central level agencies. These factors create significant difficulties in ranking, protection, and incorporation into stable promotion mechanisms. As a consequence, numerous architectural-historical assets that possess strong potential to serve as “identity anchors” for urban heritage lack adequate legal protection and appropriate utilization models, thereby reducing the effectiveness of heritage promotion within an urban space subject to intense development pressure.

From these limitations, several key issues emerge: (i) the need to reduce the imbalance between the scale of heritage resources and the organizational capacity for heritage promotion under conditions of rapid urbanization; (ii) the necessity of shifting from an emphasis on the “breadth of activities” toward the “depth of values,” through the formation of sustainable linkage models among heritage sites, museums, education, tourism, and urban spaces; (iii) the institutionalization of heritage education coordination mechanisms to ensure that such activities become stable pillars rather than fragmented, ad hoc initiatives; and (iv) the development of appropriate legal and governance solutions for unranked historic urban architectural assets—particularly the 231 identified sites and structures—in order to mitigate conflicts between conservation and development and to create pathways for sustainable heritage promotion.

Proposed Solutions for the Conservation and Promotion of Tangible Cultural Heritage in Ho Chi Minh City in the New Context

The practical challenges identified in the conservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage indicate that Ho Chi Minh City needs to shift from an approach predominantly based on administrative preservation toward enhancing governance quality and deepening value promotion, recognizing heritage as an organic component of contemporary urban life. The core objective of these solutions is to address the imbalance between the scale of heritage resources and the capacity for their conservation and valorization in the context of rapid urbanization, through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates heritage with urban planning, education, tourism, and digital transformation.

First, it is necessary to improve the institutional framework and strengthen heritage governance capacity through integration with sustainable urban planning. The role of tangible cultural heritage should be clearly defined within the City’s development strategies, master plans, and urban development programs, considering heritage conservation as a mandatory component of spatial planning, architectural planning, and infrastructure development. Accordingly, a unified coordination mechanism should be established among relevant stakeholders, including the cultural sector, urban planning and architecture agencies, tourism, education, and grassroots authorities. At the same time, a standardized system of criteria for heritage valorization should be

developed along the axes of “heritage value – accessibility – carrying capacity,” serving as a basis for heritage classification and rational allocation of resources.

For historic urban architectural works located in the central areas where pressure from land value and infrastructure development is particularly intense it is essential to establish emergency protection mechanisms for valuable buildings that have not yet been officially designated. Such mechanisms should be linked to the integration of conservation requirements into planning and construction permitting processes, through the establishment of protective buffer zones, control of building height and density, and the implementation of heritage impact assessments prior to the approval of major development projects. When the legal framework precedes development pressures, heritage valorization activities can be grounded on a more stable foundation, thereby minimizing the risk of degradation of original heritage attributes during the period awaiting official designation.

Second, heritage valorization activities should be organized through a system based linkage approach and the creation of value added chains. The promotion of tangible cultural heritage needs to move beyond isolated and fragmented practices toward a model of systematic linkage among museums, heritage sites, cultural spaces, and local communities. Particular emphasis should be placed on developing heritage value chains connected to contemporary urban life, thereby fostering linkages between conservation, utilization, and cultural enjoyment. This approach not only enhances the efficiency of heritage use but also enables heritage to participate directly and sustainably in the City’s socio economic development process.

Third, heritage education should be institutionalized to ensure sustainable value dissemination within the community. Although heritage education has achieved initial results through cooperative models between museums and schools, it remains largely campaign based and lacks long term stability. Therefore, it is necessary to establish an annual coordination mechanism between the cultural and education sectors, accompanied by a standardized system of learning materials, including lesson plans, educational resources, evaluation criteria, and digitized content. The integration of heritage into school education should be implemented flexibly and tailored to different educational levels, enabling students not only to acquire historical and cultural knowledge but also to develop awareness and responsibility for preserving and promoting heritage values in contemporary life.

Fourth, the approach to heritage tourism development should be renewed toward culturally in depth experiential models. A major limitation at present is that heritage tourism is often developed in the form of fragmented “destinations,” lacking connectivity and coherent narratives. Accordingly, there is a need to develop thematic tourism product chains such as urban memory, revolutionary history, Cho Lon as a space of cohabitation and trade, and religious and belief systems. Each thematic route should be coherently designed, encompassing interpretation content, storytelling, experiential activities, and supporting cultural products. Simultaneously, attention must be paid to visitor

capacity management and the regulation of exploitation activities to avoid excessive commercialization that may erode the original values of heritage.

Fifth, digital transformation should be promoted in conjunction with strengthening implementation capacity and expanding public access. While digital transformation offers significant opportunities to broaden public engagement with heritage, implementation capacities among institutions remain uneven. Instead of fragmented development, it is necessary to establish a shared data architecture and digital platform for the City's museum and heritage system, prioritizing digitization based on "value and risk" criteria in order to protect heritage assets at high risk of deterioration. In parallel, capacity building programs for staff should be implemented, along with minimum technical and financial support mechanisms for small scale museums and heritage sites, to ensure more equitable dissemination of digital benefits.

In summary, the core solution for the conservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City lies in the close integration of preservation and valorization within the logic of sustainable urban governance: safeguarding original values through institutional frameworks and planning; promoting heritage through system linkages and value chain development; and expanding access through education and digital transformation. This approach not only contributes to heritage preservation but also generates long term cultural momentum for the City's development in the new context.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study shows that the conservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage in Ho Chi Minh City in recent years have achieved noteworthy results. The scale of the heritage system that has been identified and brought under management has continued to expand; conservation, restoration, and renovation activities have been implemented in accordance with regulations; and the museum system has been strengthened in terms of both professional capacity and approaches to public engagement. From the perspective of heritage valorization, exhibition and display activities, heritage education programs, communication initiatives, and the application of digital technologies have been diversified, contributing to increased social access and the gradual integration of heritage into contemporary urban life.

However, within the context of rapid urbanization, increasing infrastructure development, and rising land values, practical implementation has revealed several structural limitations. Most notably, there is an imbalance between the scale of heritage resources and governance capacity; linkages among heritage sites, museums, education, and tourism remain limited; the depth of interpretation and experiential engagement is uneven; digital transformation has developed inconsistently across institutions; and many valuable architectural works—particularly in central urban areas—still lack effective protection mechanisms due to their absence from official heritage designation lists.

Against this backdrop, the article underscores the necessity of adopting an integrated approach to the conservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage, viewing heritage as an essential component of sustainable urban development. This orientation requires strengthened intersectoral coordination, standardized criteria for heritage classification and resource allocation, and the improvement of protection mechanisms (including temporary or provisional protection) for valuable heritage assets. At the same time, it calls for enhancing heritage valorization through greater interpretive depth, stronger systemic linkages, and improved public accessibility. These directions provide an important practical foundation for improving the effectiveness of tangible cultural heritage management in Ho Chi Minh City in the coming period, while also offering valuable reference experiences for other major cities in Vietnam.

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