

Marxist perspectives on the preservation and transformation of traditional Vietnamese culture

Perspectivas marxistas sobre a preservação e transformação da cultura tradicional vietnamita

Nguyen Thi Lien NHI

Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam

Email: nhintl@huit.edu.vn

ORCID: 0009-0005-8150-8053

ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, digital transformation, and rapid socio-economic change, traditional culture in Vietnam is facing both new opportunities and significant challenges. The preservation and development of traditional cultural values have become important concerns in academic research and public policy, especially as cultural practices increasingly interact with market forces, modern lifestyles, and digital communication environments. This article examines traditional Vietnamese culture from the perspective of Marxist philosophy, focusing on the relationship between cultural preservation and development in contemporary Vietnam. Grounded in dialectical materialism and historical materialism, the study applies analytical–synthetic, comparative, and interpretive methods to clarify the Marxist conception of culture as a historically conditioned form of social consciousness closely connected with material life and human social practice. From this perspective, traditional culture is not understood as a static legacy to be mechanically preserved, but as a living and evolving social phenomenon that must adapt to changing historical conditions while maintaining its essential social and cultural significance. The article argues that preserving and developing traditional Vietnamese culture should be approached as complementary rather than contradictory processes. Effective cultural preservation requires not only safeguarding historical forms but also enabling meaningful adaptation to contemporary realities. The

study contributes to a Marxist interpretation of cultural continuity and transformation while offering reflections relevant to cultural development in Vietnam today.

KEYWORDS: Marxist philosophy; culture; traditional culture; cultural preservation; cultural development; Vietnam

RESUMO

No contexto da globalização, da transformação digital e das rápidas mudanças socioeconômicas, a cultura tradicional vietnamita enfrenta novas oportunidades e desafios significativos. A preservação e o desenvolvimento dos valores culturais tradicionais tornaram-se preocupações importantes na pesquisa acadêmica e nas políticas públicas, especialmente à medida que as práticas culturais interagem cada vez mais com as forças de mercado, os estilos de vida modernos e os ambientes de comunicação digital. Este artigo examina a cultura tradicional vietnamita sob a perspectiva da filosofia marxista, com foco na relação entre preservação e desenvolvimento cultural no Vietnã contemporâneo. Fundamentado no materialismo dialético e no materialismo histórico, o estudo aplica métodos analítico-sintéticos, comparativos e interpretativos para esclarecer a concepção marxista de cultura como uma forma de consciência social historicamente condicionada, intimamente ligada à vida material e à prática social humana. Nessa perspectiva, a cultura tradicional não é entendida como um legado estático a ser preservado mecanicamente, mas como um fenômeno social vivo e em evolução, que deve se adaptar às mudanças nas condições históricas, mantendo sua essencial importância social e cultural. O artigo argumenta que a preservação e o desenvolvimento da cultura tradicional vietnamita devem ser abordados como processos complementares, e não contraditórios. A preservação cultural eficaz requer não apenas a salvaguarda das formas históricas, mas também a viabilização de uma adaptação significativa às realidades contemporâneas. O estudo contribui para uma interpretação marxista da continuidade e transformação cultural, oferecendo reflexões relevantes para o desenvolvimento cultural no Vietnã contemporâneo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: filosofia marxista; cultura; cultura tradicional; preservação cultural; desenvolvimento cultural; Vietnã

1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, culture is increasingly shaped by the intertwined forces of globalization, marketization, and digital transformation. The rapid circulation of commodities, images, symbols, and lifestyles across national borders has not only intensified intercultural encounters but has also generated profound tensions between global uniformity and local specificity (Jubelin et al., 2022). Three-dimensional in vitro culture models in oncology research (Cell & Bioscience). Traditional cultures,

particularly those of developing societies, are often placed in a vulnerable position, caught between the imperatives of economic growth, the logic of cultural industries, and the demands of cultural preservation. In many cases, cultural practices that were once embedded in concrete social relations and lived experiences are gradually transformed into commodified spectacles, tourist products, or fragmented symbolic resources. This transformation raises serious concerns about the loss of meaning, historical depth, and social functions of traditional culture (Yeganeh, 2020).

Vietnam provides a particularly illustrative case for examining these dynamics. As a country undergoing rapid industrialization, modernization, and international integration, Vietnam has witnessed dramatic socio-economic changes over the past decades. These transformations have profoundly affected cultural life, reshaping values, lifestyles, and forms of social interaction. While these changes have created new opportunities for cultural creativity and exchange, they have also posed significant challenges to the preservation of traditional cultural forms such as festivals, craft villages, folk beliefs, communal rituals, and oral traditions. In many instances, these traditions are either romanticized as static relics of the past or instrumentalized for economic and political purposes, thereby losing their internal coherence and social vitality (Ng, 2022). A central dilemma emerges from this context: how can traditional culture be preserved without being fossilized, and how can it be developed without being dissolved into the homogenizing logic of the global market? This dilemma is not merely practical but fundamentally theoretical. It concerns the very way in which culture is conceptualized. If culture is understood as a fixed essence, preservation easily turns into museumization. If culture is conceived merely as a resource for economic exploitation, development risks becoming synonymous with commodification. Both tendencies obscure the dynamic, historical, and socially embedded nature of cultural life (Hoang, 2019).

Despite the growing body of literature on cultural globalization, heritage studies, and identity politics, relatively few studies have systematically addressed this dilemma from the perspective of Marxist philosophy. Existing approaches often rely on cultural essentialism, postmodern relativism, or liberal pluralism, each of which captures certain aspects of cultural dynamics but fails to grasp the deep structural relations between culture, material production, and social power. In contrast, Marxist philosophy offers a distinctive framework for understanding culture as a form of social consciousness rooted in historical practice, shaped by material conditions, and permeated by class relations and ideological struggles (Maurer, 2006). From this perspective, culture is neither an autonomous realm detached from social reality nor a passive reflection of economic structures, but a contradictory and dynamic process in which human beings actively produce meaning under specific historical conditions (Bagga et al., 2023). However, in contemporary cultural studies, Marxist insights are often either oversimplified or marginalized. When they are invoked, they are frequently reduced to crude economic determinism or

outdated class reductionism. Such caricatures obscure the richness of Marxist thought, particularly its emphasis on praxis, historical specificity, and dialectical mediation. A systematic reconstruction of the Marxist conception of culture is therefore necessary, not only for theoretical clarity but also for practical relevance in addressing current cultural challenges (Wang, 2025).

Against this background, this article aims to re-examine the Marxist conception of culture and to explore its implications for the preservation and development of traditional Vietnamese culture. Rather than treating preservation and development as mutually exclusive, the paper argues that they should be understood as a dialectical unity. Preservation, from a Marxist standpoint, does not mean freezing cultural forms in their existing shapes, but maintaining their social functions, values, and meanings through continuous transformation. Development, likewise, should not be equated with mere innovation or commercialization, but with the creative reappropriation of tradition in new historical contexts. The central research questions guiding this study are as follows: How does Marxist philosophy conceptualize culture in relation to material production, social relations, and historical change? What theoretical principles can be derived from this conception for understanding the dynamics of cultural preservation and development? And how can these principles be concretely applied to the Vietnamese context, where traditional culture is increasingly entangled with market forces, state policies, and digital technologies? Methodologically, the study adopts a Marxist philosophical approach grounded in dialectical materialism and historical materialism. It combines conceptual analysis with contextual interpretation, aiming to bridge abstract theoretical insights and concrete social realities. By situating Vietnamese cultural practices within broader historical and socio-economic processes, the paper seeks to avoid both romantic nostalgia and technocratic instrumentalism.

2. Literature Review and Research Methodology

2.1. Literature Review

Studies on culture, cultural preservation, and cultural development have proliferated in recent decades, particularly in the context of globalization, heritage politics, and the expansion of cultural industries. A significant body of literature conceptualizes culture primarily in terms of identity, representation, and symbolic meaning. Influenced by post-structuralist and postmodern approaches, these studies emphasize the fluidity of cultural identities, the plurality of meanings, and the constructed nature of traditions. While such perspectives have contributed to dismantling essentialist and static views of culture, they often lack a systematic account of the material and social conditions under which cultural forms emerge, transform, and persist (Ciurea and Filip, 2019).

Another influential strand of research derives from heritage studies and cultural policy analysis. This literature focuses on the institutional mechanisms of preservation, including UNESCO conventions, national heritage laws, museum practices, and community-based safeguarding models. Scholars in this field have highlighted the tension between conservation and commodification, showing how heritage is frequently transformed into a resource for tourism, branding, and soft power. Although these studies provide valuable empirical insights, they tend to approach culture as an object of management rather than as a living social process embedded in power relations and historical contradictions. In the Vietnamese context, research on traditional culture has often been guided by concerns about national identity, cultural continuity, and social cohesion. Many works emphasize the moral, educational, and spiritual values of traditional practices, portraying them as repositories of timeless wisdom (Norris, 2023). While such interpretations affirm the importance of tradition, they risk romanticizing the past and overlooking the dynamic, conflictual, and historically contingent nature of cultural forms. Other studies, especially those influenced by development discourse, focus on the economic potential of traditional culture, viewing it as a resource for creative industries, rural development, and cultural tourism. This instrumental approach, however, frequently reduces culture to a means of economic growth, neglecting its intrinsic social and symbolic dimensions (Ninh, 2015).

Marxist-inspired analyses of culture exist but remain relatively marginal in contemporary Vietnamese scholarship. When invoked, Marxist concepts are often simplified into deterministic formulas, such as the notion that culture merely reflects economic structures. This reductive reading fails to capture the dialectical complexity of Marxist thought, which emphasizes mediation, contradiction, and praxis. As a result, there is a noticeable gap in the literature: few studies have systematically reconstructed the Marxist conception of culture and applied it to the problem of preserving and developing traditional culture in a rapidly changing society. This article seeks to fill this gap by offering a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive Marxist analysis. Instead of treating culture as either an immutable essence or a flexible symbolic repertoire, it conceptualizes culture as a historically produced form of social consciousness that both reflects and shapes material life. This perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of the tensions between continuity and change, stability and transformation, inheritance and innovation (Tuyet, 2024).

2.2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretically oriented research design, grounded in the philosophical principles of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. These methodological foundations are not merely technical tools but constitute a coherent worldview that shapes how social

reality is interpreted. Dialectical materialism provides a framework for analyzing culture as a contradictory and dynamic process rather than a static entity. It emphasizes the unity of opposites, the transformation of quantitative changes into qualitative shifts, and the principle of negation of negation. Applied to cultural analysis, this approach allows the study to conceptualize preservation and development not as mutually exclusive processes but as internally related moments of cultural reproduction and transformation. This method helps to avoid both conservative stagnation and uncritical modernization. Historical materialism, on the other hand, situates cultural phenomena within specific socio-economic formations. It highlights the interrelation between material production, social relations, and forms of consciousness. From this perspective, cultural traditions are not timeless inheritances but historically constituted practices shaped by concrete modes of production, class structures, and power relations. This approach enables the study to examine how Vietnamese traditional culture has been continuously reconfigured in response to colonialism, socialism, market reforms, and globalization.

In addition to these philosophical foundations, the study employs several complementary methods. Conceptual analysis is used to clarify key categories such as culture, tradition, preservation, and development within a Marxist theoretical framework. Analytical–synthetic methods are applied to decompose complex cultural processes into their constituent elements and to reconstruct them as coherent wholes. Comparative analysis is used to contrast Marxist interpretations with non-Marxist approaches, thereby highlighting the distinctive contributions of the former. Hermeneutic interpretation is employed to examine policy documents, cultural discourses, and academic texts, paying attention to their underlying assumptions and ideological orientations. Finally, the study incorporates contextual analysis of Vietnamese cultural policies and practices. Rather than treating Vietnam as a mere case study, it is approached as a historically specific social formation in which global, national, and local forces intersect. This allows the research to move beyond abstract theorization and to demonstrate the practical relevance of Marxist philosophy for contemporary cultural governance. Together, these methodological strategies enable a comprehensive and critical examination of culture as a lived, contested, and historically mediated process. They also ensure that the study remains faithful to the Marxist emphasis on praxis, that is, the unity of theory and practice.

3. Marxist Theoretical Framework on Culture

Within Marxist philosophy, culture is not conceived as an autonomous or self-sufficient sphere detached from material life, nor is it reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of economic structures. Rather, it is understood as a historically constituted form of social consciousness that emerges from, interacts with, and actively shapes human praxis (Ashley, 1985). This conception rejects both idealist

interpretations that treat culture as the product of abstract spirit and vulgar materialist views that reduce cultural phenomena to mechanical reflections of economic conditions. Instead, Marxist philosophy emphasizes mediation, contradiction, and historical specificity as fundamental principles for understanding cultural processes. A central theoretical premise of Marxist analysis is the dialectical relationship between social being and social consciousness. Marx famously argued that it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness. However, this formulation should not be interpreted in a linear or deterministic manner. Social consciousness, including culture, does not merely mirror material conditions; it actively interprets, organizes, and transforms social reality. Cultural forms embody accumulated social experiences, values, norms, and symbolic structures through which human beings make sense of their world and orient their actions. In this sense, culture is both shaped by material conditions and capable of exerting a relative autonomy (Ingold, 2002).

The concept of practice occupies a central position in Marxist epistemology and cultural theory. Practice is not merely physical labor but encompasses the totality of human transformative activities, including symbolic production, communication, and institutional organization. Culture, from this perspective, is not a passive repository of inherited meanings but an active dimension of social practice (O'Connor, 2024). Traditions are continuously reproduced, reinterpreted, and contested through everyday activities. This insight is particularly important for understanding the dynamic nature of traditional culture, which is often mistakenly treated as static or immutable. Another crucial element of the Marxist framework is the distinction between the economic base and the superstructure. While this distinction has often been misread as implying a rigid causal hierarchy, Marxist dialectics emphasize their reciprocal and mediated relationship. Cultural forms belong to the superstructure, but they are not mechanically determined by the economic base. Rather, they are shaped by complex processes of mediation involving political institutions, social struggles, ideological formations, and historical contingencies. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how traditional culture can persist, transform, or even resist dominant economic logics.

Class relations and power structures also play a decisive role in the Marxist understanding of culture. Cultural meanings are never socially neutral; they are embedded in struggles over hegemony, legitimacy, and symbolic authority. Traditions often serve as sites of contestation where different social groups negotiate their identities, interests, and visions of the future. This perspective challenges romanticized views of tradition as harmonious and consensual. Instead, it highlights the internal contradictions of cultural forms, which simultaneously preserve inherited values and reflect changing power relations. From a Marxist standpoint, historical specificity is indispensable for cultural analysis. Culture must always be examined within concrete historical contexts rather than abstract universal

categories. What counts as “tradition,” “heritage,” or “authenticity” varies across time and space. This insight prevents essentialist interpretations that freeze culture into fixed forms and ignore its evolving character. In the Vietnamese case, for instance, traditional culture has been shaped by feudal social structures, colonial encounters, socialist transformations, and contemporary market reforms. Each historical phase has reconfigured cultural meanings and functions (Jessop, 2012).

Equally important is the Marxist critique of reification and commodification. In capitalist societies, cultural products tend to be transformed into commodities, subjected to the logic of exchange value rather than use value. This process often detaches cultural practices from their original social contexts and reduces them to consumable spectacles. Marxist theory provides conceptual tools for analyzing how this process affects traditional culture, turning rituals, crafts, and festivals into marketable goods while hollowing out their communal and ethical dimensions. Finally, Marxist philosophy insists on the emancipatory potential of culture. Culture is not only a medium of domination but also a resource for resistance and transformation. Through critical reflection and creative reappropriation, social actors can reinterpret traditions in ways that challenge alienation, inequality, and cultural homogenization. This perspective is essential for understanding how traditional culture can be preserved not as a relic of the past but as a living and transformative force. This theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation for analyzing the dialectical relationship between preservation and development. It allows us to move beyond simplistic dichotomies and to grasp cultural processes as historically mediated, socially embedded, and practically enacted. In the following section, this framework will be used to reconstruct the Marxist conception of culture in greater detail.

3.1. Marxist Conception of Culture

From a Marxist perspective, culture is not an abstract spiritual realm existing independently of material life, nor is it merely an aesthetic or symbolic domain detached from social relations. Rather, culture is understood as a historically constituted form of social consciousness that emerges from concrete human practices and reflects the dynamic interactions between individuals, communities, and their material conditions of existence. This conception fundamentally challenges idealist theories that treat culture as the expression of an autonomous “spirit” and reductive materialist views that interpret it as a mechanical reflection of economic structures. Central to Marxist philosophy is the idea that human beings produce not only material goods but also meanings, values, and symbolic forms through their practical activities. Culture, in this sense, is inseparable from labor and social production. It is through labor that humans transform nature and, simultaneously, transform themselves, developing languages, rituals, norms, and systems of knowledge. These cultural forms are not arbitrary inventions but

crystallizations of collective experiences accumulated across generations. Thus, culture is deeply rooted in historical processes and cannot be adequately understood outside of them (Sewell, 2004).

Marxist theory also emphasizes the dialectical relationship between material conditions and cultural forms. While culture is conditioned by the mode of production and the structure of social relations, it is not passively determined by them. Cultural practices and meanings possess a relative autonomy, allowing them to influence social behavior, shape political consciousness, and legitimize or contest existing power relations. This relative autonomy is crucial for explaining why cultural traditions often persist even when their original material conditions have disappeared, as well as why they can be reinterpreted and mobilized in new historical contexts. Another defining feature of the Marxist conception of culture is its emphasis on contradiction. Cultural forms are not internally harmonious wholes but are shaped by social conflicts, class struggles, and ideological confrontations. Traditions often embody contradictory values, combining elements of domination and resistance, conformity and creativity. For example, a traditional festival may simultaneously reinforce social hierarchies and provide spaces for communal solidarity. This contradictory character makes culture a site of ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed inheritance (Iskamto, 2023).

Marxist philosophy also rejects essentialist views of culture that treat it as an unchanging substance or a timeless identity. Instead, it insists on the historical and processual nature of cultural forms. What is commonly labeled as “tradition” is itself the outcome of selective processes of remembering, forgetting, and reinterpretation. Traditions are not simply transmitted intact from the past; they are constantly reshaped by present needs, interests, and power structures. This insight is particularly important for contemporary debates on cultural preservation, which often rely on static notions of authenticity. The concept of ideology plays a key role in Marxist cultural analysis. Culture is not merely expressive but also normative; it organizes perceptions, shapes desires, and naturalizes specific social arrangements. Ideological elements embedded in cultural practices can obscure relations of domination by presenting them as natural, eternal, or sacred. However, ideology is not a closed system. It is continually contested through alternative interpretations, counter-narratives, and critical practices. This openness makes culture a potential terrain of emancipation as well as domination.

Furthermore, Marxist philosophy situates culture within the broader structure of the superstructure, which includes law, politics, morality, religion, and philosophy. These elements are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Cultural forms cannot be isolated from political institutions or economic relations; they are mediated by them. This holistic perspective prevents fragmentary analyses that treat cultural phenomena as self-contained or purely symbolic. Finally, Marxist thought underscores the transformative potential of culture. Because culture is produced through practice, it can also be

transformed through practice. Individuals and social groups are not passive bearers of tradition; they actively reinterpret and reconfigure it. This insight provides a theoretical basis for understanding cultural development not as a rupture with the past but as a process of creative reappropriation. Tradition, from this perspective, is not an obstacle to progress but a reservoir of meanings that can be reactivated under new historical conditions. This Marxist conception of culture provides a powerful framework for analyzing the relationship between preservation and development. It allows us to move beyond the dichotomy between conservation and innovation, recognizing both as moments within a continuous historical process. On this basis, the next subsection will examine the dialectical relationship between preserving and developing traditional culture.

3.2. Dialectics of Preservation and Development of Traditional Culture

From a Marxist standpoint, the relationship between preservation and development should not be understood as a simple opposition between stability and change. Rather, it constitutes a dialectical unity in which both moments mutually condition and transform one another. Preservation without development risks degenerating into stagnation and fossilization, while development without preservation tends toward cultural amnesia and homogenization. This dialectical perspective challenges linear models of cultural evolution that equate progress with rupture and tradition with backwardness.

Preservation, in a Marxist sense, does not mean the mechanical repetition of inherited forms. It refers to the reproduction of cultural meanings, values, and social functions through historically mediated practices. Traditions survive not because they remain unchanged, but because they are continuously reinterpreted and adapted to new material conditions. This insight resonates with the dialectical principle of negation of negation, which emphasizes that continuity is always mediated through transformation. What is preserved is not the external form of tradition, but its socially meaningful core. Development, on the other hand, should not be confused with arbitrary innovation or technological novelty. In capitalist societies, development is often reduced to economic growth, productivity, and market expansion. Applied to culture, this logic tends to prioritize spectacle, commodification, and consumer appeal. From a Marxist perspective, however, genuine cultural development involves the expansion of human capacities, the enrichment of social relations, and the deepening of collective self-understanding. It is measured not by profit margins but by the degree to which cultural practices enhance human freedom and social solidarity.

The dialectical relationship between preservation and development becomes particularly visible in moments of social transformation. When material conditions change rapidly, inherited cultural forms may lose their original functions, leading to crises of meaning and identity. In such contexts, preservation

cannot mean restoring the past in its original shape, because the social conditions that sustained it no longer exist. Instead, traditions must be critically reappropriated, recontextualized, and sometimes partially negated in order to remain meaningful. This process illustrates the dialectical logic of continuity through rupture. Contradiction plays a central role in this dynamic. Traditional culture often embodies values that conflict with contemporary social realities. For example, communal ethics may clash with individualistic market rationality, and ritual time may conflict with the accelerated temporality of digital life. These contradictions should not be suppressed but critically engaged. Through such engagement, tradition can become a resource for social critique rather than a nostalgic refuge. Another crucial dimension of this dialectic is selectivity. Preservation is never a neutral act; it always involves choices about what is remembered and what is forgotten. These choices are shaped by power relations, ideological frameworks, and institutional interests. Marxist analysis reveals that cultural preservation often reflects dominant social interests, presenting certain traditions as “authentic” while marginalizing others. Recognizing this selective character prevents the naturalization of tradition and opens space for democratic participation in cultural decision-making.

The danger of commodification looms large in contemporary cultural development. Under market conditions, traditional practices are frequently transformed into consumable goods, stripped of their social embeddedness and ethical depth. Festivals become tourist attractions, crafts become souvenirs, and rituals become performances. While such transformations may generate economic benefits, they also risk emptying culture of its lived meanings. Marxist critique exposes how commodification alienates cultural producers from their own traditions, turning them into objects rather than subjects of cultural life (Shaw, 2024).

However, Marxist theory does not advocate a rejection of modernity or technological change. On the contrary, it insists on the creative appropriation of new conditions. Digital platforms, for instance, can both erode and revitalize traditional culture. They can trivialize rituals into content, but they can also enable new forms of community, documentation, and intergenerational transmission. The question is not whether to embrace or reject modernity, but how to mediate it through critical praxis. Central to this dialectic is the role of social subjects. Culture is not preserved or developed by abstract forces but by concrete individuals and communities acting within specific historical contexts. This emphasis on agency distinguishes Marxist analysis from structural determinism. Social actors are capable of reflecting on their traditions, criticizing them, and creatively transforming them. Preservation and development thus become moments of self-determination rather than external impositions. Ultimately, the dialectical unity of preservation and development implies that tradition is not the opposite of modernity but one of its conditions. A society that loses its cultural memory also loses its capacity for critical reflection.

Conversely, a society that clings uncritically to the past risks suffocating its own future. Marxist philosophy offers a framework for navigating this tension by emphasizing historical consciousness, social critique, and emancipatory praxis. This dialectical understanding provides a conceptual foundation for examining the Vietnamese case, where traditional culture is increasingly entangled with market forces, state policies, and global cultural flows. The next subsection will apply these theoretical insights to the concrete conditions of contemporary Vietnam.

3.3. Implications for Vietnam

Applying the Marxist conception of culture and the dialectical relationship between preservation and development to the Vietnamese context requires a careful consideration of the country's specific historical trajectory. Vietnamese traditional culture has been shaped by a long history of agrarian life, village-based social organization, Confucian ethics, indigenous beliefs, and repeated encounters with foreign powers. These layers of historical experience have produced a rich cultural texture characterized by communal solidarity, respect for continuity, moral education, and symbolic attachments to land, ancestors, and collective memory. However, this cultural configuration has never been static. Colonial domination, revolutionary struggles, socialist transformation, and market-oriented reforms have successively restructured social relations and, consequently, cultural forms. From a Marxist perspective, these transformations should not be seen as external shocks imposed upon an otherwise timeless tradition, but as moments of historical mediation through which culture has been continuously reconstituted. This insight challenges the widespread tendency to treat Vietnamese traditional culture as a sacred heritage that must be preserved intact, independent of social change.

In the contemporary period, Vietnam's integration into the global capitalist economy has intensified the commodification of culture. Traditional festivals, crafts, folk performances, and heritage sites are increasingly incorporated into tourism industries, branding strategies, and creative economies. While these processes generate income and visibility, they often detach cultural practices from their original social functions. Rituals that once structured communal life are transformed into spectacles for external consumption. From a Marxist viewpoint, this transformation reflects the subordination of use value to exchange value, leading to the alienation of cultural producers from their own traditions.

At the same time, state cultural policies in Vietnam emphasize the importance of safeguarding national identity, promoting cultural diversity, and strengthening social cohesion. These goals resonate with Marxist concerns about the emancipatory potential of culture. However, policy discourse sometimes oscillates between two extremes: museum-like preservation that freezes tradition, and technocratic modernization that instrumentalizes it. Both tendencies risk undermining the living character of culture.

A dialectical approach suggests that preservation should focus on maintaining the social vitality of cultural practices rather than their formal appearance. For example, a traditional festival should not be evaluated solely in terms of its “authentic” costumes or rituals, but in terms of its capacity to sustain communal bonds, transmit values, and provide spaces for collective participation. Development, in turn, should not aim at replacing tradition with novelty, but at enabling its creative transformation under new conditions.

This perspective has important implications for the management of both tangible and intangible heritage in Vietnam. In the case of craft villages, preservation should not mean merely maintaining old techniques for display purposes, but ensuring that artisans can sustain their livelihoods, innovate responsibly, and pass on their knowledge. Similarly, in the digital age, traditional narratives and practices can be reinterpreted through new media forms without losing their symbolic depth, provided that communities remain active agents rather than passive content providers. Marxist philosophy also emphasizes that culture is a terrain of struggle. Different social groups interpret tradition in different ways, reflecting their material interests and social positions. In Vietnam, tensions often arise between local communities, state institutions, and market actors over the meaning and ownership of cultural heritage. A dialectical approach does not seek to eliminate these tensions but to make them visible and politically negotiable. Democratic participation in cultural decision-making is essential for preventing the monopolization of tradition by powerful actors.

Another crucial implication concerns the role of education. From a Marxist standpoint, cultural preservation is inseparable from the formation of critical historical consciousness. Young generations should not merely learn about traditions as static facts, but as evolving practices shaped by social struggles and creative reinterpretations. This approach prevents both blind reverence for the past and uncritical fascination with novelty. Finally, the Marxist emphasis on praxis highlights that cultural policy should not be confined to symbolic gestures. It must be linked to broader socio-economic conditions. Poverty, inequality, and labor precarity undermine the capacity of communities to sustain their cultural practices. Thus, cultural preservation cannot be separated from social justice. A culture that survives only as a commodity or a museum exhibit has already lost its emancipatory potential. In this sense, the Marxist framework offers not a technical solution but a critical orientation. It urges policymakers, scholars, and communities to treat culture as a living process rooted in social relations, historical contradictions, and human agency. Preservation and development are not administrative tasks but collective practices of meaning-making. This analysis prepares the ground for a broader theoretical reflection. The following section will situate the Marxist approach in dialogue with other contemporary cultural theories, highlighting its distinctive contributions as well as its limitations.

4. Discussion

The Marxist approach to culture presented in this study offers a distinctive perspective when compared with dominant contemporary theories of culture. Many non-Marxist frameworks, such as cultural essentialism, postmodern relativism, and liberal pluralism, have significantly shaped current debates on cultural identity and heritage. Each of these perspectives captures certain dimensions of cultural life, yet they also exhibit important theoretical limitations. Essentialist approaches often conceive tradition as a stable core of identity that must be protected from external influences. While such views emphasize continuity and rootedness, they tend to overlook the historical and social processes through which traditions are formed, transformed, and sometimes invented. By treating culture as an unchanging substance, essentialism risks freezing tradition into a museum artifact, thereby undermining its capacity to adapt to new conditions. In contrast, Marxist philosophy rejects this static understanding and insists on the historical and processual nature of cultural forms.

Postmodern and constructivist approaches, on the other hand, stress the fluidity of meaning, the multiplicity of identities, and the discursive construction of tradition. These perspectives have been instrumental in dismantling rigid notions of authenticity and in highlighting the politics of representation. However, their focus on discourse and symbolism often comes at the expense of analyzing material conditions and power structures. As a result, they struggle to explain why certain cultural forms persist, why others disappear, and how economic forces shape cultural production. The Marxist framework addresses this gap by linking cultural dynamics to concrete social relations and material practices. Liberal pluralism emphasizes tolerance, diversity, and individual choice in cultural life. While these values are important, this approach tends to treat culture as a collection of freely chosen lifestyles rather than as a historically mediated social process. It often neglects structural inequalities that limit cultural agency and shape access to symbolic resources. From a Marxist standpoint, cultural freedom cannot be reduced to individual preference; it requires social conditions that enable meaningful participation in cultural production.

One of the major strengths of the Marxist approach lies in its capacity to integrate symbolic analysis with materialist critique. By conceptualizing culture as a form of social consciousness rooted in praxis, it avoids both economic reductionism and cultural idealism. This balance allows for a nuanced understanding of how traditions can simultaneously reproduce social hierarchies and serve as resources for resistance. In the Vietnamese context, this insight is particularly valuable, as traditional culture often functions as both a source of national cohesion and a terrain of social contestation. However, the Marxist approach is not without limitations. Classical Marxist texts were primarily concerned with class struggle, industrial labor, and political economy. They offer fewer explicit tools for analyzing contemporary

phenomena such as digital culture, identity politics, and transnational cultural flows. Although Marxist categories can be extended to these domains, such extensions require careful reinterpretation rather than mechanical application. Failure to do so risks turning Marxism into a rigid doctrine rather than a critical method.

Another challenge concerns the tension between universality and specificity. Marxist theory emphasizes structural patterns of social development, which can sometimes overshadow local particularities. In cultural analysis, this may lead to the underestimation of symbolic nuances and lived experiences. To remain relevant, Marxist cultural studies must remain attentive to micro-level practices and voices, especially those of marginalized communities. Despite these challenges, the Marxist approach retains strong contemporary relevance. In an era marked by the commodification of culture, algorithmic mediation, and growing inequalities, its emphasis on praxis, historical consciousness, and social power provides critical resources for understanding cultural change. It allows scholars to question not only what culture means but also who controls its production, distribution, and interpretation. For Vietnam, this perspective offers a way to navigate the tension between national identity and global integration. It suggests that cultural preservation should not be reduced to symbolic performance, and development should not be equated with market expansion. Instead, both should be grounded in the lived experiences of communities and oriented toward human emancipation. Ultimately, the Marxist framework does not provide ready-made solutions. Its value lies in its capacity to pose critical questions, expose hidden contradictions, and open spaces for collective reflection. In this sense, it remains a powerful tool for both cultural theory and cultural practice.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that Marxist philosophy provides a theoretically robust and practically relevant framework for understanding culture as a historically constituted form of social consciousness rooted in human praxis. Rather than conceiving tradition as a static essence or reducing development to market-driven innovation, the Marxist perspective reveals preservation and development as dialectically interconnected processes. Tradition is not merely inherited but continuously reconstituted through social practice, contradiction, and creative reinterpretation. By applying this framework to the Vietnamese context, the study has shown that contemporary challenges to traditional culture cannot be addressed through museum-like conservation or instrumental modernization. Instead, cultural policy and practice must prioritize social vitality, community agency, and historical consciousness. Theoretically, this research contributes to a systematic reconstruction of the Marxist conception of culture. Practically, it offers a critical orientation for developing more human-centered and socially grounded approaches to cultural

governance. Future studies may further explore how Marxist categories can be reinterpreted in relation to digital culture, transnational flows, and emerging forms of cultural labor.

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