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Alt-Text Descriptions



Figure 1.

Short: A photograph of a historical style painting shows several figures inside a room, with the central figure shown in motion.

Long: The photograph shows the historical style painting of an interior scene with muted earth tones and textured brushwork. At the center, a standing figure wearing patterned clothing is shown with one leg raised and arms extended. On the left side of the scene, another figure stands facing the central figure, wearing long garments and holding an object close to the body. On the right side, a table covered with cloth is visible, holding tall candles and small containers. Beneath and beside the table, two figures are shown crouched on the floor. The background is an enclosed room with walls and hanging objects above the figures.



Figure 2.

Short: A photo of a stage performance shows dancers in colorful costumes holding flags and swords under bright theatre lighting.

Long: The photograph shows the stage performance inside a traditional theatre setting. Several performers stand across the stage in coordinated poses, wearing bright costumes in blue, white, and yellow. Many of the performers hold raised swords, while a central performer, lifted above by others, holds a multicolored flag aloft. The background features an ornate stage design with red curtains, carved decorative elements, and illuminated lanterns. Above and behind the performers, rectangular panels display lines of text in a light color against dark backgrounds. The stage floor is red.



Figure 3.

Short: A photograph of a group of people in traditional costumes standing indoors, facing one another during a ceremonial scene.

Long: The photograph shows a group of people dressed in ornate traditional costumes inside a wooden-roofed interior space. On the left, one person in a purple robe and tall purple headdress faces the rest of the group, standing near a wall with decorative items and flowers placed on a surface. In the center, a person wearing a blue robe stands with hands raised in a respectful gesture, facing the decorated wall. At the back, on the left side, a person stands in richly patterned armor and a decorative headpiece. To the right, several other individuals stand in a line, wearing red, black, and gold costumes, some with painted faces or elaborate headwear, watching the central interaction. Behind the group, large vertical panels are mounted on the wall, each labeled with lines of Chinese characters arranged in columns, bordered by decorative patterns. The floor is covered with woven mats, and wooden beams and tiles are visible overhead.



Figure 4.

Short: A photograph of a large outdoor procession of people wearing colorful masks and traditional costumes walking together.

Long: The photograph shows the large outdoor procession taking place in daylight along a paved area near a traditional temple building. Many people walk forward in close formation, all wearing brightly colored robes and detailed masks with bold patterns, exaggerated facial features, and painted expressions. In the foreground, several masked figures wear colorful costumes decorated with embroidered motifs. One person holds an object shaped like a short blade, carried upright. Behind them, a long line of similarly dressed participants extends into the distance. In the background, a multi-tiered temple structure with ornate roof details stands to the left, while trees, banners, and street lighting are visible along the route.

Transmitting intangible cultural heritage through cultural identity and equity: the *Echoes of a Thousand Years* Hue Tuong street festival

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Hai Nguyen Thanh
University of Arts, Hue University, Hue, Vietnam, and
Peera Phanlukthao

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts and Cultural Studies, Mahasarakham University,
Maha Sarakham, Thailand

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how the “*Echoes of a Thousand Years*” Hue Tuong street festival transmits and sustains intangible cultural heritage in a UNESCO World Heritage city, exploring its effects on cultural identity, economic activity, and social cohesion.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative multi-method design, the researchers conducted field observations, in-depth interviews with artists, organizers, officials and attendees, two focus groups, and a survey of residents and tourists; data were analyzed through thematic coding.

Findings – The festival democratizes access to traditional court performances, enhances community pride and cultural awareness, and stimulates local economic and entrepreneurial activity; however, challenges in youth engagement and balancing authenticity with commercial viability remain.

Originality/value – By applying identity and equity frameworks to a Vietnamese street festival, this paper offers fresh insights into heritage transmission via public events and delivers practical guidance for cultural managers seeking to integrate preservation with sustainable tourism and community development.

Keywords Bodily practice, *Echoes of a Thousand Years*, Festival, Hue Tuong, Street performance

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Hue is a UNESCO World Heritage city situated along the North Central coast of Vietnam. The city is distinguished by its historical and cultural richness, stemming primarily from its past as the imperial capital under the Nguyễn Dynasty. There are five UNESCO World Heritage sites within Hue, each preserving the traditions and artistic legacies of the ancient Hue Royal Court. One such initiative is the “*Echoes of a Thousand Years*” street festival, organized by the Hue Monuments Conservation Center and the Thua Thien Hue Province. This festival attempts to recreate a vibrant street festival atmosphere to engage onlookers in fostering a deeper appreciation for Hue cultural heritage.

According to [Herrero et al. \(2012\)](#), cultural festivals of this nature act as catalysts for cultural innovation and social bonding, simultaneously attracting financial investments essential for sustaining the culture upon which they are based. The festival is particularly significant in its role as a cultural conduit between the past and present. By staging traditional Tuong performances, which historically graced only the royal stages and aristocratic audiences, the festival democratizes access to this elite form of cultural expression, allowing it to resonate with a wider public. This strategic approach also doubles as an educational initiative that provides insight into sophisticated Hue cultural expressions and provides a significant economic uplift ([McKercher and Chan, 2005](#)). While cultural enrichment forms a



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core aspect of festivals' success, balance is crucial to ensure they do not devolve into mere commodification (Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007).

Recent debates have identified festivals as a pivotal interface between cultural heritage and cultural evolution. They are living embodiments of intangible cultural heritage (Deng *et al.*, 2023). They are platforms for the expression of communal identity that play a crucial role in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practices. The success of such events hinges on their relevance and resonance with the community's cultural ethos (Özdemir and Çulha, 2009; Yenipinar and Yildiz, 2016). Successful models of this include the Carnival of Venice, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the New Orleans Mardi Gras, which encourage cultural preservation through engagement, ensuring that the intangible cultural heritage survives in the consciousness of both locals and visitors (Gold and Gold, 2020).

In this research, the objective is to explore the significance and influence of the *Echoes of a Thousand Years* festival in promoting and preserving Hue's cultural heritage. This study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how festivals can serve as effective tools for cultural heritage transmission. The research is framed by two guiding questions: (1) How are the values, characteristics, and identity of Tuong Hue interconnected in the *Echoes of a Thousand Years* festival? (2) How does the formal content of the festival influence public awareness and emotions within the context of Hue's cultural development?

Literature review

Festivals have long been significant cultural expressions that evolve alongside human societies (Masilela *et al.*, 2024). They serve not merely as entertainment, but as mirrors reflecting social values and historical continuity (Finkel and Platt, 2020; Quinn, 2007). In the post-World War II era, improved leisure and travel opportunities spurred a dramatic proliferation of festivals worldwide (Giorgi *et al.*, 2011). Scholars describe this trend as the "festivalization" of culture, wherein cities and communities increasingly leverage festivals for tourism, branding, and cultural expression (Gold and Gold, 2020). According to Derrett (2000), festivals have become dynamic elements of the leisure and tourism sector, catalyzing both cultural engagement and economic activity (see also Arcodia and Whitford, 2007). Indeed, festivals are complex cultural phenomena that embody the values of their locale and become authentic expressions of community identity (Del Barrio *et al.*, 2012). They are "live events" through which intangible heritage is performed rather than merely exhibited, helping transform cultural practices into shared social experience (Belanus and Fernandez, 2014).

Festivals function as powerful educational platforms for transmitting values and skills across generations. This dual role is crucial in a globalized era of cultural homogenization. Festivals offer a space to revitalize unique traditions, resisting the erosion of local identities by dominant global culture (Devismes, 2013). Cudny (2014) observes that festival activities often encompass a wide array of forms – from music and dance to storytelling and cuisine – which together create an immersive "living museum" of heritage. By participating in such multi-sensory experiences, community members (especially youth) gain a deeper appreciation of cultural nuances that static displays or formal education might overlook (Cadaval *et al.*, 2016). Recent studies confirm that traditional festivals can strengthen cultural pride and identity: Deng *et al.* (2023) show that national heritage festivals foster both cultural inheritance and innovative adaptation in their communities. Similarly, Yenipinar and Yildiz (2016) argue that heritage events (such as the Mesir Festival in Turkey) serve as vital conduits for cultural continuity.

Importantly, festivals also stimulate community development and social cohesion. Herrero *et al.* (2012) note that cultural festivals attract outside interest and investment, which in turn supports the very culture being showcased. However, stakeholders emphasize that maintaining authenticity is crucial for festivals to have a meaningful impact (Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007). Authentic festival experiences allow participants to truly connect with local history and values, thereby strengthening the festival's role as a custodian of

heritage (Ram *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, preserving and showcasing genuine cultural elements in festivals is not only key to visitor satisfaction, but also critical for safeguarding traditions. Chhabra *et al.* (2003) argue that festivals should avoid “staged authenticity” and instead involve true local culture, as this authenticity sustains the heritage being presented. Farrelly *et al.* (2019) similarly highlight that festival organizers (the “producers” of culture) must balance market appeal with the integrity of cultural content. In essence, the literature suggests that authentic experiences at festivals create a virtuous cycle: they deepen attendees’ appreciation of the culture, which enhances the festival’s educational value and reinforces community pride.

To better understand festivals’ impacts, scholars have applied theoretical frameworks such as equity theory and identity theory. Equity theory provides insight into residents’ support for events by examining perceived fairness: if locals feel that the costs of hosting a festival (e.g. crowds, noise) are justified by the benefits (economic gains, cultural pride), they are more likely to endorse and participate in the festival (Kwon and Jang, 2012). Fair distribution of festival rewards – for instance, ensuring local businesses and artists benefit – can thus influence community buy-in and long-term sustainability of the event. Meanwhile, identity theory suggests that festivals help forge links between individual identities and collective culture by offering opportunities for self-expression and validation of one’s heritage (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Participating in traditional festivals often allows individuals to “perform” their culture, reinforcing their sense of self and belonging within the community. Empirical studies support this: Lee and Chang (2017) found that immersive festival experiences among indigenous groups in Taiwan strengthened attendees’ personal identification with their culture. Likewise, Lin and Lee (2020) showed that authenticity in a traditional festival enhanced both festival identity and place identity for participants. Festivals also become potent informal educational platforms, transmitting cultural knowledge and values in engaging ways (Özdemir and Çulha, 2009). For example, a well-curated festival program can teach younger generations about historical customs through hands-on exposure, supporting intergenerational knowledge transfer in ways that formal schooling may not (Yenipinar and Yildiz, 2016). The consensus in recent literature is that festivals – when authentic and community-centered – can effectively foster cultural learning, identity affirmation, and social bonds across age groups. This underscores their multifaceted value: economically, socially, and culturally.

Despite these benefits, festivals face significant challenges in contemporary society. Unchecked commercialization can erode the very authenticity that makes festivals culturally valuable. As Getz (2010) warns, an over-emphasis on revenue and spectacle may undermine community support and reduce festivals to superficial attractions. Moreover, globalization exerts pressure on local festivals to conform to international tastes. Picard and Robinson (2006) observe that global cultural flows tend to homogenize festivals, diluting unique local characteristics in favor of internationalized components. Zhang *et al.* (2021) considered festivals to bring economic benefits and heightened visibility; on the other, it threatens the integrity of the cultural experience. Indeed, recent research on heritage events in China confirmed that while commercialization can boost tourism and income, it simultaneously undermines visitors’ sense of authenticity and satisfaction if taken too far.

Another set of challenges involves cultural evolution and audience engagement. Festivals must continually adapt to remain relevant, but this must be done without forsaking tradition. The influx of outside influences can create cultural compromises: as global entertainment trends seep in, local communities sometimes struggle to recognize their own heritage in the festival’s programming (Picard and Robinson, 2006). Additionally, engaging younger generations has become a pressing issue. With the rise of digital media and changing leisure preferences, traditional festivals can find it difficult to capture the attention of youth (Derrett, 2003). Younger audiences may view certain ritualistic or historical performances as old-fashioned or inaccessible, especially if not presented in an interactive or contemporary way. Derrett (2003) notes that festival organizers need to make traditions relatable to modern attendees – for instance, by using social media, storytelling, or interactive workshops – to

spark interest among the youth. A failure to do so could result in dwindling local participation over time, jeopardizing the continuity of the festival's heritage. At the same time, event managers are aware that overt modernization might alienate elders or culture-bearers. Striking a balance between tradition and innovation is therefore paramount (Frost, 2016). Successful festivals often incorporate new elements (such as modern music, technology, or creative interpretations of folklore) as a complement rather than a replacement for core traditions (Frost, 2016). This careful blending allows festivals to evolve with society while maintaining their cultural essence. Scholars have highlighted community involvement as a key strategy in this balancing act: festivals that actively involve local cultural practitioners and stakeholders in decision-making tend to preserve authenticity even as they innovate (Getz, 2013; Richards, 2015). By empowering local voices, festivals can introduce contemporary features (e.g. youth-oriented activities) in a way that still respects the community's heritage and values.

Research methodology

To address the two research questions, the researchers employed a multidisciplinary methodology. The team conducted visits to the Hue Royal Traditional Arts Theater to observe the live performance aspects of Tuong. This allowed for direct interaction with the performance space and an understanding of the operational dynamics within a traditional setting. A review of existing literature, including books, academic papers, and practical studies on Hue culture and related subjects, was undertaken to build the theoretical framework. The researchers also examined the natural, cultural, and social conditions of Hue, delving into its traditions and community life. This included studying the system of five cultural heritages recognized in Hue, both tangible and intangible, to understand their interconnectedness and individual contributions to the local culture.

Once these background investigations had been completed, the researchers engaged with key figures in Hue, including La Thanh Hung, a distinguished artist from a three-generation opera family, and People's Artist Bach Hac, Director of the Hue Royal Traditional Arts Theater, actors Thanh Hoai, Dinh Viet, and Tran Tuan, and researcher Nguyen Xuan Hoa, former Director of the Hue Department of Culture and Information. In Vietnam, the title "People's Artist" (*Nghệ sĩ Nhân dân*) is a state-conferred honor awarded to performers who have made exceptional and enduring contributions to national arts and culture, signifying both professional excellence and cultural stewardship. These individuals provided deep insights into the operational and artistic nuances of Tuong. They participated in in-depth interviews of 20–30 min to discuss the accuracy of representation of Hue culture within the festival as well as its success as a vehicle for cultural safeguarding. The interviews focused on several areas: (1) historical context about the development of Tuong Hue; (2) artistic characteristics and essence of Tuong Hue; (3) contemporary challenges faced amidst the evolution of the era and competition from modern culture; (4) personal insights and sentiments of those involved; and (5) the relationship between traditional Hue culture and its integration into contemporary cultural expressions through street performance festivals. All named participants provided informed consent for the use of their names in this paper.

The researchers held further informal discussions with actors and artisans involved in the festival to determine a broader spectrum of opinions on the event, as well as with both domestic and international tourists during street performances and interactive activities at the festival. This provided perspectives on visitor engagement and the impact on a diverse audience. Subsequently, the research team held focus group discussions with a local research and development team, comprising researchers, university lecturers, and state agency experts on Hue culture and arts, to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the cultural landscape and its evolution. These were supplemented by surveys among residents, workers, and tourists participating in the festival to capture a spectrum of experiences and perceptions related to the event. During the festival, the primary researcher also conducted direct observations of

participant interactions and festival dynamics to capture the essence of the festival's impact on public perception and cultural engagement.

The research team employed a triangulation approach to validate the findings from these varied methodologies. Triangulation in this context involved integrating multiple data sources and methods to cross-verify the data collected. By correlating findings from direct observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys, the researchers could address any discrepancies and reinforce the reliability of the conclusions drawn. The analysis process then began with inductively coding the qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions to identify recurring themes and patterns, and key participant perspectives were integrated directly into the thematic analysis to foreground respondent voices. Using a reflexive thematic analysis approach, codes from interviews, focus groups, observations, and open-ended survey responses were iteratively grouped into higher-order themes (Table 1). The integration of firsthand observational data with the subjective perceptions gathered through interviews and surveys provided a comprehensive view of the festival's role in cultural transmission and its reception by the community and visitors.

Results

A brief history of Vietnamese Tuong Hue

Vietnamese Tuong Hue is a significant cultural artifact that traces its roots back to the early history of the Vietnamese nation, initially manifesting as parody where individuals entertained others through imitation of movements, gestures, language, and behavior (Spangler, 2010). This form of expression became institutionalized during the Dinh Dynasty (968–980), laying the foundation for what would evolve into a rich tradition of Vietnamese theater (Mackerras, 1987). Throughout the Early Le Dynasty (981–1,009) and into the Ly Dynasty (1,009–1,225), theater flourished as a medium for cultural transmission, with professional actors emerging and the roles of *Dao* (female actress) and *Kep* (male actor) becoming standardized (Su, 1994).

However, the trajectory of this cultural expression was significantly influenced by socio-political dynamics, notably during the Tran and Le dynasties. For instance, the Tran Dynasty's victory over the Yuan army introduced new elements into Vietnamese theater as Ly Nguyen Cat, a captured Mongolian singing double from the Song Dynasty, was brought to teach at the court, integrating diverse cultural influences into Tuong (Nguyen, 2021). Conversely, the Le Dynasty saw periods of repression, such as in 1,437 when King Le Thai Tong banned theatrical and folk shows from the Royal Court, reflecting the tension between cultural practices and royal decree (Khánh, 2024).

The role of cultural figures like Lord Nguyen Hoang and Đào Duy Tu was pivotal in the preservation and adaptation of Tuong. Lord Nguyen Hoang's move to Thuan Hoa in 1,558 marked a critical phase in disseminating Tuong to the central regions of Vietnam, indicative of how cultural practices migrate and adapt across different regions (Corey, 2021). Đào Duy Tu, on the other hand, exemplifies the role of cultural agents in shaping the identity and trajectory of traditional arts. By relocating from Thanh Hóa to Bình Định, he challenged existing cultural norms and established a distinct singing style in the Central region (Nong, 1943; Xuyen, 2024).

The evolution of Vietnamese Tuong Hue into a celebrated national theater form was significantly influenced by the synergy between a culturally astute lord and a visionary artist, culminating in the creation of Tuong Son Hau, also known as San Hau (Trang, 2020). This opera, originally crafted in the late 18th century and later revised by Dao Tan, is considered a classic of the Vietnamese Royal Court opera genre. The patronage of the Nguyen Lords during the 16th century allowed Tuong to capture the hearts of the masses, establishing it as the national drama of Dang Trong and ensuring its prominence through the 19th century.

Oral histories recounted by the research respondents indicate that the cultural life under the Nguyen Lords was intricately linked with elaborate rituals and customs, with Tuong being integral to royal entertainment and daily court activities. Particularly during the reign of Lord Nguyen Phuc Nguyen (1,613–1,635), performances of singing and dancing were primarily

Table 1. Thematic coding analysis process by theme

Theme	Description	Subthemes	Initial codes	Data extracts
1. Democratizing Tuong	The festival brings an elite royal-court art into public urban space, widening access	Public accessibility; Street as performance space	“Showcase Tuong to a broader audience”; “accessible to everyone”; “bringing Tuong into the streets”	“The festival is a unique opportunity for us to showcase Tuong art to a broader audience. Each mask and movement tells a story from our history . . .” (Artist, 2023)
2. Cultural identity and pride	The festival reinforces local pride, emotional attachment to Hue, and the image of Hue to outsiders	Community pride; Place attachment; Image of Hue	“Time of real pride”; “streets come alive”; “promote image of homeland and people of Hue”	“Every year, the streets come alive with the colors and sounds of the festival. It’s a time of real pride for us . . .” (Local resident, 2023)
3. Educational transmission and awareness	The festival functions as an informal learning space where attendees come to understand Tuong’s meanings and values	Learning meanings of masks; First-time understanding; Youth discovery	“Left with a profound appreciation”; “don’t fully get all the historical stuff”; “more activities to join in”	“I was drawn to the festival by its vibrant atmosphere, but I left with a profound appreciation for Tuong . . . learning about the meanings behind the masks has been an unexpected highlight.” (Tourist, 2023)
4. Challenges to sustainability	Persistent tensions in engaging youth, maintaining authenticity, and managing practical issues (timing, training, compensation)	Youth engagement; (Mis) understanding; Timing and logistics; Artist livelihoods	“Participate in the spirit of responding to the movement”; “do not really understand the inherent meaning”; “rituals too early/too late”; “difficult to recruit and train new actors”	“Some people (particularly youth) participate in the spirit of responding to the movement but do not really understand the inherent meaning of the festival activities.” (Field notes/interviews, 2023) “There are some rituals performed early in the morning and evening . . . affect people’s interaction.” (Artist/participant, 2023)

reserved for public holidays, leading to the establishment of the court's official singing and dancing troupes. Historical records highlight the Nguyen Lords' deep appreciation for the performing arts, especially Tuong. Notably, Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, renowned for his skill as a Tuong drum player, further embedded Tuong in the cultural fabric of the palace. His passion for the art form was exemplified during a notable performance of Tuong in the presence of the esteemed Chinese monk, Master Thich Dai San. This significant cultural exchange was meticulously documented by Master Thich Dai San in his chronicles of the social culture of Nam Ha during his time at Thien Lam and Thien Mu Pagodas in Thuan Hoa.

Historical accounts detail how the art of Tuong was deeply embedded in the cultural and ceremonial practices of the Nguyen Lords' courts. A vivid depiction from the records of Master Thich Dai San illustrates this integration during a royal event:

After the party, we said goodbye and went home. The next day, the Princess prepared a vegetarian feast. There was a play, the King brought the little maids (female singers and dancers) to the party, cleared the banquet table, and let the Vuong's little maids sing first. During the singing, the owner places a large drum (drum) on the side of the stage, occasionally making two or three drum beats, with the same meaning as old time tapping, the tone is strange, the style is also different. It was very interesting for people at the party to watch. (San, 1963, n.p.)

The reign of Lord Nguyen Phuc Khoat further exemplifies the flourishing of Tuong, marked by the construction of numerous palaces and opera theaters. His contributions included enhancing the Royal Palace opera troupe by bringing in singing children (actors) from Binh Dinh, which underscored his commitment to nurturing this cultural legacy. During this era, the art of Tuong in Phu Xuan was not only widespread but also became more standardized and methodical. The stages of the time were simple yet symbolically decorated, reflecting the conventional aesthetic of the period and facilitating a focused appreciation of the performances. This era solidified Tuong's status within the cultural hierarchy, ensuring its continued evolution and

F1 adaptation (Figure 1).



Figure 1. E.Gras' watercolor painting depicting a scene in a theater in Hue, in the right corner, there is someone reading the lines. Source: Urban people e-magazine

Although the Tay Son Dynasty (1788–1801) endured only a brief period, King Quang Trung’s substantial contributions to culture significantly enriched Vietnamese Tuong, particularly in Hue. His affinity for Tuong and talent in clowning, combined with the skills of professional and amateur opera artists among his soldiers, allowed this art form to flourish even further. King Quang Trung’s personal engagement and patronage played a crucial role in continuing the legacy of the Nguyen Lords, thereby maintaining the cultural continuity and development of Tuong in Hue.

Under King Quang Trung, Binh Dinh Tuong was particularly nurtured and adapted in Hue, enhancing the local opera tradition and contributing to its identity. This period exemplifies how cultural leaders can profoundly impact the preservation and evolution of traditional arts through personal interest and strategic support (Ngoc, 2016.). Following the Tay Son Dynasty, the Nguyen Dynasty oversaw a varied history of cultural attention toward Tuong. Initially, Gia Long’s reign focused less on cultural endeavors, concentrating more on consolidating his regime after conquering Phu Xuan. However, subsequent emperors like Minh Mang and Tu Duc placed greater emphasis on Tuong, with Minh Mang establishing the first large-scale Tuong actor training school and constructing the Duyet Thi Duong Theater—the first royal stage. These efforts culminated during Tu Duc’s reign, which is often regarded as the golden era of Tuong. Tu Duc not only supported the art form but was personally involved in its development, establishing organizations dedicated to composing and revising Tuong performances. This period saw the creation of complex opera scripts and performances that could last entire nights, reflecting a profound commitment to the art.

The role of Tuong during the colonial era under French rule highlights its adaptability and socio-political significance (Tư 2022). Under Emperor Thanh Thai, Tuong transformed from royal entertainment to a medium for expressing nationalist sentiments and anti-colonial resistance. This shift illustrates the art form’s flexibility and its deep connection to Vietnamese cultural identity and political consciousness, resonating with the masses and serving as both elegant entertainment and a vehicle for subtle resistance against colonial oppression. This era underscored the enduring importance of Tuong as a living, evolving expression of the people’s spirit and aspirations:

... That art was originally a royal pleasure, but later became an organ to express the people’s will. With time, the winner also forgets the storm and looks with gentle eyes at the art that reflects a time so glorious. Unexpectedly, the artistic cloak cloaked political ambitions, that stage was just a powerful propaganda tool for underground resistance to colonialism. Boi singing blends into the masses, both as an elegant entertainment and as the motherland’s gentle lullaby to the hidden prospects of the people who are gritting their teeth and speechless ... (Dung, 1970, 259)

After 1945, the opera industry in Hue experienced significant disruptions, and many opera troupes disbanded. During the resistance period, Tuong Hue faced numerous challenges, including economic hardships, lack of operational resources, and the aging or departure of skilled artisans. Many artisans were forced to seek alternative employment. This period of decline lasted until 1975 when Vietnam was unified. Post-unification, there was a nationwide effort to rebuild and develop cultural sectors, leading to the revival of the Tuong industry. Opera troupes were restored and returned to effective operation.

Currently, prominent Tuong troupes in Hue include the Hue Royal Traditional Arts Theater, which emerged from the merger of the Hue Traditional Arts Troupe and the Royal Theater and Dance Art Troupe under the auspices of the Hue Monuments Conservation Center (Figure 2). Historically, Tuong primarily catered to the upper class, with stringent norms and principles governing its performance style. Originally a scholarly art form of the Hue Royal Court and once considered a national drama, Tuong Hue now struggles with dwindling audiences despite efforts by governmental and cultural agencies to preserve and promote its cultural values. Today, Tuong Hue resonates mostly within the street performance festival *Echoes of a Thousand Years*, highlighting the challenges of maintaining audience interest in traditional art forms.

F2



Figure 2. Performance of the Tuong excerpt *The Goddess offers the Five Spirits*. Source: Researchers 2024

The nature of the Hue festival

The following information was gleaned from researcher observations of the Hue Festival and verified through interviews with locals, participants and audience members. Thanh Binh Tu Duong is a key location for the festival. Built in 1825, this Hue-style communal house has been restored multiple times, maintaining its traditional structure and continuing to play a crucial role in cultural events and ceremonies. This integration of historical preservation with cultural revival efforts represents a creative and dynamic approach to keeping local traditions alive and relevant in contemporary society. In front of Tu Duong stands a royal concubine lacquered with gold, engraved with the words *Thanh Binh Tu Duong*. Inside, those who have contributed to the Tuong industry and related fields are honored. The most revered spot is dedicated to the Can Cuong Hau tablet, considered the ancestor of the Tuong industry. There are two theories about Can Cuong Hau: one legend describes him as a Chinese invited by King Minh Mang to teach singing to the Vietnamese, while another theory suggests he was a Vietnamese who learned dance and song in China and then taught these arts in Vietnam. Historically, Tu Duong was a vibrant hub during the reign of Nguyen Thanh Binh, known for its annual three-day ceremony attracting Tuong troupes nationwide, featuring a reporting ceremony, a principal ceremony with That Kich and Cheo performances, and a concluding thanksgiving and clean-up day. Today, these rituals have been simplified to offerings that show admiration and respect for the ancestors.

- F3 Following the Appreciation Ceremony held at Thanh Binh Tu Duong (Figure 3), the festival includes a street performance with around 200 participants, including artists, actors, and artisans. This procession showcases the Tuong mask wearing ceremony and traditional costumes, accompanied by the Bat Dat Royal Court music and dance team (Figure 4).
- F4 As they march through the streets, particularly through Chi Lang and Tran Hung Dao, ending at Nghinh Luong Dinh, the performers create a vivid tableau of Hue Tuong's beauty. This culminates in performances of ancient Tuong excerpts, such as *Moc Que Anh offers a tree*, *Manh Luong catches a horse*, and *Good and evil are hidden*. These performances enhance the



Figure 3. Ceremony of gratitude and admiration for the predecessors of Tuong art at Thanh Binh Tu. Source: <https://laodong.vn/photo/quang-dien-nghe-thuat-tuong-den-voi-cong-chung-dip-festival-hue-2022-1061700.ldo> 2024



Figure 4. Tuong Hue mask procession and performance ceremony on main streets. Source: <https://laodong.vn/photo/quang-dien-nghe-thuat-tuong-den-voi-cong-chung-dip-festival-hue-2022-1061700.ldo> 2024

festive atmosphere and deepen the audience's understanding of Tuong art through the visual and performative elements.

The festival concludes with the participants gathering at Duyet Thi Duong theater to conduct a flower offering ceremony to honor the ancestors, demonstrating deep respect and reverence for their cultural forebears. The street performance festival, thus acts as a vital initiative by cultural management agencies and the government of Thua Thien Hue Province to preserve and promote the intrinsic values of Hue Tuong. This endeavor ensures that the opera continues to thrive and reconnects with its historical beauty, affirming its enduring vitality as a unique and scholarly art form. As noted by Nguyen Khoa Diem, former head of the Central Committee for Cultural Ideology: "time has proven the stature of a cultural heritage. Time also proves the ability to preserve human heritage, time supports people, is not a dormant destruction, time is helping us revive the beauty of the past . . ." (Interview, 2023).

Respondent perspectives on festival impact and the safeguarding of cultural heritage

The perspectives shared by interviewees reveal how different groups experience and interpret the festival, offering insight into both its cultural value and its limitations. One artist emphasized that "the festival is a unique opportunity for us to showcase Tuong art to a broader audience. Each mask and movement tells a story from our history" (Interview, artist, 2023). His reflections underline how performers view the street context as crucial for sustaining Tuong: by moving an historically court-bound art form into public space, practitioners feel they can reconnect it with contemporary audiences and secure its continuity. This sense of duty was a recurring sentiment among artists involved in the festival.

A local resident echoed the festival's emotional resonance, explaining that "*every year, the streets come alive . . . it's a time of real pride for us*" (Interview, resident, 2023). Yet she also noted a tension between pride and comprehension, observing that younger attendees often enjoy the spectacle without grasping Tuong's symbolic depth. This ambivalence suggests a generational gap in cultural literacy, despite the festival's inclusive format. Her comments highlight the festival's dual effect: it strengthens communal belonging while exposing uneven levels of cultural understanding.

Tourist responses pointed to the festival's educational potential. One visitor recalled being drawn initially by the lively atmosphere but leaving "*with a profound appreciation for Tuong*" after learning about the meaning of the masks (Interview, tourist, 2023). This illustrates how the festival functions as an informal learning environment, where curiosity sparked by performance quickly evolves into cultural insight. Such reactions indicate that the aesthetic immediacy of Tuong remains a powerful gateway for first-time audiences. Festival organizers were acutely aware of these dynamics. As one explained, "*our goal is to make Tuong accessible to everyone . . . we're constantly looking for ways to improve engagement, including optimizing event timings*" (Interview, organizer, 2023). His comments point to ongoing efforts to balance tradition with practicality; accessibility is not only cultural but logistical, and adjustments in scheduling are viewed as essential to broaden participation. This pragmatic viewpoint contrasts with the artists' more preservation-focused concerns, showing how different stakeholders prioritize different aspects of the festival's mission. Young people, meanwhile, offered a more hesitant engagement. One attendee admitted that although the festival's energy was appealing, "*I don't fully get all the historical stuff . . . maybe more activities I could join in would help*" (Interview, youth, 2023). This perspective reveals how entertainment alone is insufficient to secure long-term interest, and suggests that more participatory, youth-oriented formats may be necessary if Tuong is to remain meaningful to the next generation. The findings of this study demonstrate the significant role that the Tuong Hue street performance festival plays in bridging cultural values within Hue. Central to the festival's success is its capacity to draw substantial local and tourist participation, thereby fostering a vibrant and festive atmosphere.

Critically, the festival serves as a public platform for the dissemination of Tuong art, making the nuanced and colorful aspects of Tuong masks accessible to a broader audience. These masks are integral to understanding the characters in Tuong performances, with each color signaling specific personality traits. By experiencing these performances firsthand, festival attendees gain insights into the narratives of virtue and aesthetics embedded in Tuong, which traditionally catered exclusively to the aristocracy within the royal courts. This exposure democratizes access to this scholarly art form, enhances public appreciation and deepens emotional and cognitive engagement with Hue's royal cultural heritage. Through these interactions, the festival significantly shifts public perception and fosters a deeper connection with the historically elite Tuong art, promoting a more inclusive cultural understanding. The street performance festival has the direct meaning of honoring the identity values of Hue Tuong, making Hue Tuong live in contemporary society, in addition to indirect significance, contributing to the success of Hue's Festivals, thereby affirming, honoring and promoting the nation's unique traditional cultural values. At the same time, the festival promotes the image of the homeland and the people of Hue to domestic and international audiences. Besides these positive factors, the festival has some limitations. Some people (particularly youth) participate in the spirit of responding to the movement but do not really understand the inherent meaning of the festival activities. Similarly, they do not appreciate the beauty of Tuong art. According to interviews with artists and festival participants, the organizing agencies should adjust the time to be more reasonable to fit the content of the performance because there are some rituals performed early in the morning and evening (too early and too late) affect people's interaction.

Discussion

From these results, it can be clearly seen that Tuong Hue street performance festival has created a positive environment to spread and promote Hue's cultural values. Most of the participants in the activities of the advertising festival felt proud, happy, excited and excited to participate, and residents and tourists responded with enthusiasm. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the emotional energy generated on the streets, with residents remarking that "every year, the streets come alive ... it's a time of real pride for us." (Interview, resident: 2025) This mirrors findings by [Herrero *et al.* \(2012\)](#) that cultural events catalyze social bonding and economic benefits, demonstrating how the Hue festival's success in community engagement aligns with broader "festivalization" trends ([Giorgi *et al.*, 2011](#); [Gold and Gold, 2020](#)). The festival has a strong influence, connecting the identity and values of the past with the present, creating social traditions, enriching cultural heritage. Artists in particular interpreted their participation as a cultural responsibility, noting that bringing Tuong into public space allows them to "showcase Tuong art to a broader audience" and ensure that its stories remain visible. The positive impact of the festival on the promotion and dissemination of Hue's cultural values aligns with the broader understanding of festivals as pivotal platforms for cultural expression and heritage preservation ([Cudny, 2014](#)). By reinforcing spectators' sense of place identity and self-verification ([Lin and Lee, 2020](#); [Stryker and Burke, 2000](#)), the festival's emotive atmosphere exemplifies how participatory performance can embed cultural narratives into individual and collective consciousness. This was reflected in tourist accounts describing how an initial attraction to the festival's atmosphere developed into "a profound appreciation for Tuong" once the meanings of the masks and characters were explained. The festival fosters communal pride and excitement among participants and spectators, serving as a living embodiment of Hue's unique traditions and demonstrating the dual economic-cultural role of such events ([Arcodia and Whitford, 2007](#)).

Hue retains its distinctive traditional cultural values, offering unique advantages for the preservation and promotion of Tuong Hue. These advantages include a dedicated research and translation room, a team of passionate professional artists, and an authentic stage for performances. The festival operates as a site of both cultural reproduction and innovation.

Its careful curation of Tuong elements alongside street-theatre formats exemplifies “authentic experiences” that bolster visitor satisfaction and heritage conservation (Chhabra *et al.*, 2003; Farrelly *et al.*, 2019). Interviewees’ references to the visual impact of the masks and movements support the idea that authenticity remains central to audience engagement, even when performances are relocated to contemporary urban settings. By maintaining the unique traditional culture of Hue while introducing appeal and diversity, the festival exemplifies the dynamic nature of cultural practices described by Quinn (2007). It navigates the delicate balance between preserving authenticity and engaging modern audiences, which is crucial to prevent cultural events from devolving into mere commercial spectacles (Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007). Moreover, the equitable distribution of performance opportunities to local artists supports community buy-in, as equity theory predicts that perceived fairness in cost–benefit ratios underpins sustained support (Kwon and Jang, 2012). The application of identity theory here is pertinent, as the festival reinforces personal and collective identities by allowing individuals to connect deeply with their cultural heritage, thus facilitating the internal process of self-verification (Stryker and Burke, 2000). This connection is essential for the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practices, ensuring the longevity of Tuong Hue in the collective consciousness.

However, the art form faces significant challenges. Recruiting and training new actors prove difficult as contemporary youth show diminishing interest in traditional values, drawn instead toward more modern and competitive art forms. Additionally, the rigorous and prolonged training required to master Tuong, coupled with modest compensation, does not align well with the professional demands placed on the actors. These concerns were echoed in interviews, where young attendees expressed enjoyment of the festival atmosphere but struggled to connect with the historical depth of the performances. Yet, the most pressing challenge facing Tuong today is the dwindling audience base. These challenges mirror the concerns highlighted in the literature regarding cultural commodification and the waning interest among younger generations (MacLeod, 2006; Derrett, 2003). As MacLeod (2006) warns, unchecked commercialization risks transforming cultural rituals into market spectacles, and the presence of prominent branding can overshadow the very symbolism the festival seeks to celebrate. The difficulty in recruiting and training new actors, coupled with the modest compensation and rigorous demands of mastering Tuong, underscores the need for strategies that make traditional arts more accessible and appealing to contemporary youth. Implementing participant-led workshops and community advisory boards—as recommended by Getz (2013) and Richards (2015)—could mitigate these challenges by anchoring festival evolution in local values and ensuring authentic community involvement. This situation invokes the principles of equity theory, as the perceived imbalance between the efforts required and the rewards received may deter potential practitioners (Kwon and Jang, 2012). Addressing this requires creating a more equitable environment where the benefits of engaging with Tuong, such as personal fulfillment, cultural connection, and community recognition, are enhanced to outweigh the costs.

The festival’s role as an educational tool is significant in bridging the gap between traditional arts and modern audiences. By offering engaging and instructive experiences, it helps demystify Tuong and highlights its aesthetic and historical values, effectively combating the risk of cultural erosion due to globalization and modern entertainment alternatives (Picard and Robinson, 2006). This educational function was evident in the voices of tourists and youth who described the festival as their first meaningful encounter with Tuong’s symbolic language. This supports the concept of festivals as constructivist museums (Belanus and Fernandez, 2014), where sensory engagement deepens cultural knowledge and aligns with UNESCO’s framework for safeguarding intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Through such immersive experiences, the festival not only elevates public appreciation of Tuong but also stimulates community development by fostering social bonding and cultural innovation (Herrero *et al.*, 2012).

Recommendations

This study contributes to festival and heritage scholarship in three key ways. First, it offers a rare, in-depth case study of a Vietnamese street festival that operationalises UNESCO's notion of intangible cultural heritage through live, urban performance. Second, by applying identity and equity frameworks to interview, focus-group and survey data, it shows how "*Echoes of a Thousand Years*" redistributes symbolic and economic value among artists, residents and visitors. Third, it foregrounds participants' voices to demonstrate how emotional attachment, perceived fairness, and practical barriers (such as timing and format) shape the long-term sustainability of heritage festivals. The researchers would like to make some recommendations for practical application of the findings. Firstly, organizing agencies should host the event more frequently, because its nature as an annual event is unnecessary and hampers the longer term impact. New organization times should avoid the rainy season (as in the case of the 2023 program when the second performance was scheduled for the evening of September 26, 2023 but had to be canceled due to rainy weather).

This research emphasizes the significant role of Tuong Hue in cultural education and policy development, potentially serving as a key reference for scholars, art practitioners, and cultural policymakers. The study highlights the importance of integrating Tuong Hue into educational programs and cultural policies to ensure its preservation and relevance in contemporary society. Specifically, it highlights efforts in Thua Thien Hue Province, where the Hue Monuments Conservation Center collaborates with the Hue City Department of Education and Training to conduct heritage education programs for local students, fostering early engagement with cultural heritage. The research also draws attention to strategic cultural promotion through public events like the festival. People's artist Bach Hac, director of the Hue Royal Traditional Arts Theater, articulated the festival's dual purpose: "We organized the program to both pay tribute to our predecessors, arouse the love for the profession of artists and introduce and promote the art of theater." This initiative honors traditional arts and addresses the challenge of audience engagement, particularly among the youth, by making Tuong more accessible and relatable through dynamic public performances.

Participants' feedback from the festival indicates a growing curiosity and appreciation for Tuong among newcomers, especially young people. Their enthusiasm suggests that these public performances are crucial in cultivating a new generation of patrons and practitioners who will carry on the Tuong legacy. As one festival attendee remarked, the event's format as an engaging street performance provides an excellent introduction to the art form, helping to ensure that this "extremely valuable culture left by our ancestors" continues to thrive and evolve (Interview, youth attendee, 2023).

Ethical statement

This research received approval from the researchers' university advisory board [redacted for anonymous peer review]. All participants gave informed written consent to participate in the study and publish the results.

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The researchers wish to declare that artificial intelligence technologies provided by Grammarly have been used to ensure the language and presentation of the paper is suitable for academic publishing. The meanings and ideas are all the authors' own work and the authors checked and approved all text prior to publication. The authors confirm that the manuscript is their own work in line with COPE recommendations.

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AQ: 10 **Further reading**

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Corresponding author

AQ: 6 Hai Nguyen Thanh can be contacted at: hainguyen503thanh@gmail.com