

# MODIFICATIONS OF VIETNAM'S CULTURAL POLICIES DURING THE PARTICIPATION IN THE ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY (ASCC)

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**Abstract** - Since the country's reunification in 1975, Vietnam has implemented numerous policies to preserve, conserve, and promote its national cultural values. The Party and State of Vietnam have recognized culture as a crucial factor in stabilizing society and strengthening national security and politics, as demonstrated by their cultural policies throughout subsequent historical periods. In particular, since joining ASCC (2015), Vietnam has made many adjustments in the promulgation and implementation of cultural policies within the framework of ASCC cooperation. The article analyzes Vietnam's cultural perspectives and policy adjustments before and after joining the ASEAN Community, from cautious steps following the unification period to innovation during the “open door” period, and then to strong integration within the ASEAN Community, all aimed at achieving a sustainable future, thereby enhancing Vietnam's position in the international zone.

**Key words** - ASEAN; ASCC; Vietnam; culture; cultural policies

## 1. Introduction

The formation of the ASEAN Community (AC) with three main pillars: ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is inevitable for Southeast Asian countries, demonstrating the cohesion of communities in the area, creating conditions for deeper political-economic-social cooperation in the context of globalisation and digital transformation, in which the ASCC is considered a fundamental pillar, connecting the two remaining pillars and ensuring the success of AC. Hence, member countries, including Vietnam, have made specific strategic modifications, especially cultural strategies in constructing and developing the country according to the world and regional situation. In this regard, most published studies, both domestically and abroad, have only mentioned the formation process of ASCC. At the same time, the period when ASCC began to operate in practice lacked updated studies, especially analyses on the localization and adaptation of Vietnam's cultural policies to the ASCC cooperation framework. Therefore, research on the adjustment of Vietnam's cultural policies before and after joining ASCC will contribute to providing new data in the study of cultural governance of Southeast Asian countries, specifically the case of Vietnam.

By using specialized research methods such as the historical method, logical method, international relations research method, comparative-analytical-contrastive method,..., the article clarifies: For Vietnam, the modification in promulgating and implementing cultural

policies within the cooperation scheme of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 (ASCC Blueprint 2025) becomes a vital part for social stability, economic development, supporting national and regional peace and security, as well as enhancing Vietnam's position among the international zone.

## 2. Results and discussions

### 2.1. Vietnam's cultural policies before joining the ASEAN socio-cultural community

#### 2.1.1. Vietnam's historical context after 1975

Following reunification in 1975, Vietnam entered a period of socialist reconstruction, characterized by centralized planning and strict state control. The main reasons stemmed from the urgent needs of the post-war period: heavily damaged infrastructure, a backward economy, along with international pressure and an embargo. Vietnam faced an economic crisis, inflation, and numerous difficulties in people's lives. Therefore, the Government prioritized political consolidation and economic recovery, aiming to build a solid foundation for long-term development, while protecting national sovereignty against regional and world fluctuations. This significantly shaped Vietnam's approach to international relations, especially in the cultural sphere.

In 1986, Vietnam launched the “Đổi Mới” (Innovation) process, moving towards the market economy. This transformation brought about significant economic achievements and gradually opened the door to the outside world. Although the foreign policies were still cautious, they created changes in preserving and promoting Vietnamese cultural values, demonstrating the balance between preservation and modernity at that time.

In 1995, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This pivotal moment signalled the desire for peace, stability and regional cooperation. ASEAN created a framework for economic, political and socio-cultural cooperation, creating the premise for deeper cooperation between Vietnam and neighbouring countries.

#### 2.1.2. Features of Vietnam's cultural policies from 1975 to before joining the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community

Since 1943, before independence, in the Outline on Vietnamese Culture, our Party (Communist Party of Vietnam - CPV) clearly stated: “*The culture is one of three fronts: economic - political - cultural*” [1].

From 1975 to 1986, the country unanimously followed

the CPV's leadership. The State (Socialist Republic of Vietnam - SRV) protected and promoted national identity, encouraged patriotism, and overcame all socio-economic crises and the complicated world situation. At this time, Vietnam prioritised protecting and promoting national identity, aligning with national goals. Policy measures focusing on preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritages, such as folk traditions, festivals and historical relics, promoting the Vietnamese language, traditional literature, and arts, strengthened the sense of cultural unity and patriotism, becoming a bulwark against external influences and internal divisions. Cultural institutions, artistic activities and educational programs were managed mainly by state agencies. Vietnam's interaction with the international community in the cultural field was also limited, focusing mainly on cooperative activities with the Soviet Union (USSR) and other socialist countries. In 1976, Vietnam became a member of UNESCO. It participated in several educational, scientific and cultural initiatives, but the participation was modest and often limited to programs aligned with government priorities.

From 1986 to 2015, Vietnam underwent profound changes in the economy and socio-cultural sphere, opening up many opportunities for investment from foreign capital sources, trade, and tourism. These became catalysts for an era of cultural exchange, preservation and development. During this period, Vietnam's cultural policies had the following features:

*Firstly, Vietnam clearly identified the protection and promotion of cultural heritage as the foundation of its development policies.*

Legal frameworks such as the Law on Cultural Heritage (2001, amended in 2009, 2013) [2] institutionalised activities to protect both tangible and intangible cultural heritages, prescribed the State's responsibilities and called for community participation, as well as encouraged the application of advanced technology in conservation. The Strategy for Cultural Development till 2020 (Decision No. 581/QĐ-TTg, dated May 6, 2009) [3] continued to consolidate this orientation, setting specific goals for maintaining and restoring traditional values, crafts and art forms.

*Secondly, Vietnam's cultural policies clearly demonstrated a vision in which cultural development was more closely linked to socio-economic development.*

The Resolutions of the 10th National Congress of the CPV (2006) and the 11th Congress (2011) [1] both emphasised the role of culture as the spiritual foundation of society and the driving force for sustainable development. This view was clearly reflected in policies encouraging creativity and innovation in the arts and investment in infrastructure to support cultural industries. The goal was to build a society that was economically prosperous and culturally dynamic, where the population's material and spiritual lives were improved. According to the Strategy for cultural development till 2020, Vietnam "focuses on building mechanisms, policies and business environment to develop the "cultural industry", the goal was to increase the proportion of the cultural industry to

about 3% of GDP by 2020. According to this strategic goal, culture had to truly participate in building a "fair, democratic, civilised" society [3].

*Thirdly, Vietnam's cultural policy aimed to demonstrate a strong commitment to international cooperation and align with global standards.*

On February 14, 2011, the Prime Minister issued the Strategy on Cultural Diplomacy through 2020 (Decision No. 208/QĐ-TTg dated February 14, 2011) [4]. This was Vietnam's first strategy in the cultural field to proactively implement the policy and active international integration of the 11th National Party Congress. On February 8, 2015, the Prime Minister signed Decision No. 210/QĐ-TTg approving Vietnam's Cultural Strategy for Foreign Relations until 2020 with a Vision for 2030 (Enclosed with the Prime Minister's Decision No. 210/QĐ-TTg dated February 8, 2015) [5]. Vietnam's Cultural Strategy for Foreign Relations was a policy orientation and a strategic step to affirm the country's position in globalisation. Through cultural exchange, Vietnam promoted traditional arts and introduced Vietnamese heritage, language, cuisine, and people. At the same time, cooperation with international organisations, cultural centres, universities, and foreign researchers also opened up opportunities for academic exchange, creative exchange, and development of joint projects on heritage conservation, promoting the development of the cultural industry. Vietnam achieved many important milestones by inscribing typical relics and traditions on the UNESCO World Heritage List such as the Complex of Hue Monuments (1993), Ha Long Bay (1994, 2000), Hoi An Ancient Town (1999), My Son Sanctuary (1999), Hue Royal Court Music, Central Highlands Gong Cultural Space (2008), Ca Tru and Quan Ho Bac Ninh folk songs (2009), and Southern Southern Amateur Music (2013). At the same time, the connection of heritage with contemporary arts and media, combined with international cultural elements, began to be promoted. The Hue Festival in 2000 was the most evident proof.

Thus, before joining ASCC, Vietnam's cultural policies consistently focused on preserving cultural identity and developing culture associated with socio-economic development and international integration, laying the foundation for later active participation in ASCC.

## **2.2. Vietnam's cultural policies since joining the ASEAN socio-cultural community**

### **2.2.1. The requirements of the times**

In the development process of ASEAN countries' history, the diversity of political institutions, economic foundations, development gaps between countries and regions, challenges from religious communities, and other issues were also issues that governments must balance when implementing cultural policies. Before the ASCC was established, mutual understanding between regional communities was still limited. ASEAN countries realized that culture was an important bridge to help countries in the region increase understanding, build trust, and cooperate sincerely in the ASEAN Community, thereby creating a solid foundation for a stable investment and trade environment, contributing to improving people's spiritual

life associated with sustainable economic development. Hence, from 2010 to 2015, ASEAN countries made efforts to promote policies and cultural exchange activities as an essential measure of the country's economic development. This was clearly demonstrated by promoting tourism, strengthening regional cooperation, and enhancing the national image. Traditional festivals, cultural heritage, and national arts attracted millions of international visitors each year and generated significant revenues, promoting the development of related industries such as services, transportation, accommodation, and handicrafts. Specifically, according to the 2016 DBS Bank report based on World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) data, tourism accounted for 12.4% of ASEAN's GDP in 2015 [6]. According to UNESCO and the UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture Report, held in 2015, it clearly stated the key role of cultural tourism in regional economic development, contributing to the preservation of heritage and traditional culture, with a GDP contribution rate of about 10 to 12% in several nations such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam during this period. According to data from the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism and Vietnam tourism statistics reports in 2013, total tourism revenue reached more than 7.5 billion USD, of which a significant portion of revenue came from World Heritage sites such as Ha Long Bay, Hoi An Ancient Town, and traditional cultural events [7] - [10].

Thus, by exploiting and preserving unique cultural values, ASEAN countries protected their national identity and enhanced their economic competitiveness in the international zone. Furthermore, understanding ASEAN countries' cultures also helped mitigate conflicts between members. This created many new opportunities and challenges for ASEAN governments regarding cultural development associated with sustainable economic development in globalisation. In that context, On December 31, 2015, ASEAN Community was officially established, member countries considered ASCC an important pillar and a decisive factor for the success of AC.

Simultaneously, member countries approved the ASCC Blueprint 2025 to orient the development of the Socio-Cultural pillar in the next phase [11]. In these contents, the cultural element in ASCC was expressed through the goal of "building ASEAN identity". Thus, the cultural element was raised to a strategic level, connecting the community and being a driving force for sustainable development and substantive integration of the region. Also, ASEAN countries adopted the ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025 [12]. This was an official document issued by ASEAN to specify the vision and goals of ASCC in promoting cultural cohesion, preserving heritages, and developing culture-based creative industries during this period. In particular, the Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on Culture and the Arts (2016), the Vientiane Declaration on Reinforcing Cultural Heritage Cooperation in ASEAN (April 2017) and the Declaration on Culture of Prevention (CoP) (November 2017) contributed to orienting and demonstrating the commitment of member countries to implement cultural policies in accordance with the ASCC

cooperation framework, towards ASEAN cohesion and sustainable development [13] - [15].

Through the above documents and events, the ASCC's views on culture could be specified as follows:

*Culture was the foundation for building ASEAN identity and regional consensus:* The ASEAN Charter (2008) identified one of the most important principles of the ASEAN Community as "respect for the diversity of cultures, languages, religions and traditions of member states" [16]. This principle was not limited to the commitment but was also specified in ASEAN's policies and activities. Respecting and preserving the cultural identity of each member country was considered a crucial foundation for building solidarity, maintaining peace, stability, and promoting general development for the region.

*Culture was a tool to promote social cohesion and sustainable development:* According to UNESCO (2015), culture was a "key driver for sustainable development" because it promoted creativity, innovation, and social consensus. When cultural values were respected and promoted, the differences between member countries would become strengths, helping to build trust, consensus, and solidarity at the regional level. Especially in the context of globalization and challenges such as climate change, epidemics, or social instability, culture became a soft resource that helped the community respond flexibly, maintain identity, and develop harmoniously and sustainably. Hence, the ASCC promoted culture as an endogenous driving force for long-lasting development and solid cohesion of the ASEAN community.

*Culture was the driving force of innovation and the new economy:* Culture was also a source of inspiration for innovation, creating conditions for forming cultural and creative industries, contributing to economic diversification, and expanding employment opportunities. Developing cultural and creative industries promoted economic growth and contributed to expanding employment, supporting green growth and sustainable development for local communities.

*Culture became an important tool for ASEAN countries to build their "national brands" and enhance their positions in the international zone.* In the context of globalization and complex challenges such as climate change, social instability, or the spread of foreign values, preserving and promoting traditional cultural values helped the community increase its adaptability, maintain its identity, and develop harmoniously. At the same time, when cultural values were respected and promoted, differences between countries were no longer barriers but became strengths, creating a favorable environment for consensus, solidarity, and enhancing the region's position in the international zone.

*Culture was seen as a tool to resolve disputes and strengthen regional social cohesion:* ASCC recognised that promoting a general regional identity required preserving heritage and promoting a sense of community among member countries. Promoting mutual understanding of

cultural diversity helped to mitigate conflicts and disagreements due to cultural differences, thereby contributing to the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Thus, culture was a central driving force for sustainable socio-economic development in ASEAN countries. Culture contributed to creating a humane, united, and prosperous ASEAN, while ensuring inclusiveness, stability, and sustainability for the development of each member state. And it could be affirmed that: "If we looked at the long term, ASCC was the future of ASEAN..." [17].

#### *2.2.2. Vietnam's modifications in cultural policies in the new era*

The movement of the world and regional situation at this time required Vietnam to adjust its cultural policy, demonstrating more initiatives in international exchanges and its role in regional issues. Thus, on December 31, 2015, when the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community was officially established, Vietnam became a dynamic country, positively contributing to deeper cooperation on the organization's cultural, educational, and social development issues. Accordingly, Vietnam adjusted its cultural policy during this period to suit the situation.

*Firstly, Vietnam's policy framework began to align with ASEAN's broader goals.*

Vietnam adopted the principles of inclusion, mutual respect, and cultural diversity, demonstrated by supporting regional conventions and standard cultural norms. It demonstrated a clear path towards greater compatibility with ASEAN's overall goals. The integration of regional principles such as cooperation, mutual respect, and appreciation of diversity into the national framework characterised this development.

Through the consistent implementation of the Prime Minister's Strategy for Cultural Development until 2020, The implementation of the project on formulating and executing the plan to achieve the objectives of ASCC by 2025 (known as Project 161), the Cultural Development Target Program for 2016-2020, cultural exchanges and cooperation, and the implementation of the ASCC Blueprint 2025 [11], [18], [19], [20], Vietnam demonstrated greater transparency in its cultural policies within the ASCC. These policies have now been more deeply integrated and imbued with "Vietnamese cultural identity". In addition, the views on Vietnamese culture of the late General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and the Resolution of the 13th Party Congress also contributed to strengthening the development of national cultural policies: "It is necessary to thoroughly grasp the viewpoint that 'culture must be placed on par with economics, politics, and society'" [21]. The recent 13th Party Congress determined that our country's overall development strategy in the coming time is to comprehensively and synchronously promote the innovation process, develop rapidly and sustainably, and ensure close connection and synchronous implementation of tasks [1]. Besides, within the framework of the 9th AMCA conference, at the AMCA+3 meeting, Vietnam and member countries, and representatives of China, Japan, and Korea, emphasised the

importance of building a list of ASEAN cultural heritages, promoting digital connectivity in the cultural field, and effectively implementing the ASEAN Cultural and Arts Strategic Plan for the period 2016-2025.

Integrating ASEAN principles into Vietnam's policies resulted in significant progress in protecting, promoting, and renewing culture. These developments enhanced Vietnam's position and the role of ASEAN and illustrated the broader benefits of policy harmonization and regional cooperation in the cultural field.

*Secondly, Vietnam promoted the need to harmonise and preserve cultural identity to avoid the risk of assimilation and loss of traditional cultural values.*

Vietnam has long been aware that, in the face of rapid modernisation and globalisation, it is necessary to avoid the risk of cultural assimilation and losing its unique heritage. Thus, the government has implemented a range of policies and initiatives to promote harmony and preserve cultural identity, from continuing to implement the Law on Cultural Heritage, followed by the National Target Program on Cultural (2024), with funding for the restoration of historical relics, supporting traditional arts and crafts, to encouraging the teaching of ethnic languages in schools.

Vietnam pursues the policy of building an advanced Vietnamese culture rich in national identity, ensuring a balance between the country's modernization process and the need to protect cultural values, reflecting the belief that development and heritage conservation can - and should - go hand in hand.

With this view, Vietnam has contributed to the ASEAN Cultural Heritage Digital Archive (ACHDA), a digital initiative to preserve and display cultural artifacts across Southeast Asia. Vietnam has also regularly participated in and hosted activities such as the ASEAN Cultural Festival, the ASEAN Youth Cultural Forum (AYCF), the ASEAN Day commemoration on August 8, and the ASEAN University Network (AUN). These exchange activities enhanced cultural exchanges and academic cooperation and fostered intercultural capacity and regional identity for the participating parties. Furthermore, the Vietnamese Ethnic Groups' Culture Day, held annually on April 19, has also contributed to introducing the traditional arts, cuisine, and crafts of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, demonstrating the response to the ASCC's call for cultural preservation and respect for diversity. Besides, Vietnam has also implemented policies to encourage the recording and teaching of ethnic minority languages and projects to restore traditional costumes and rituals.

Through this comprehensive approach - from strong national policies reinforced by regional cooperation - Vietnam demonstrated its commitment to preserving its cultural identity while seizing integration opportunities.

*Thirdly, Vietnam has considered culture a social construct and a powerful catalyst for economic development.*

Vietnam's cultural policies are based on the belief that culture shapes social cohesion, national identity, and community values and brings significant economic

potential. Vietnam's policy documents emphasise the importance of integrating cultural values into all aspects of socio-economic planning. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism affirmed: "Developing the cultural sector is not only about preserving traditions but also about creating new economic opportunities, especially in the fields of tourism, creative industries and cultural exports."<sup>1</sup> The government approved Decision 1755/QĐ-TTg dated September 8, 2016, on the development strategy of Vietnamese cultural industries by 2020, with a vision for 2030 [23]. Accordingly, creative industries, including traditional crafts, performing arts, cinema, and design, are actively promoted through government initiatives and public-private partnerships. Heritage tourism, exploitation of UNESCO-recognised heritage sites, and Vietnamese folk festivals have also become the objects of exploitation of the cultural industry.

Vietnam's approach was closely aligned with the ASCC Blueprint 2025, emphasising culture to promote social inclusion, regional identity, and sustainable economic development. Vietnam has allocated a budget for promoting cultural heritage, contemporary culture, literature, and arts to build a national brand associated with cultural values. Within this framework, Vietnam cooperates with other ASEAN countries in cultural exchanges, heritage conservation projects, and the promotion of creative industries. Primary activities include participating in the ASEAN Digital Repository of Cultural Heritage, co-organizing ASEAN cultural festivals, and contributing to joint efforts to promote cultural tourism across Southeast Asia.

*Fourth, while participating in ASCC, culture became Vietnam's "soft power" to promote peace and stability, especially in digital transformation and globalization.*

Vietnam continues to implement The Strategy on Cultural Diplomacy through 2020 persistently and actively, and culture has been a gentle but persuasive way to shape perceptions and foster goodwill in the region and globally.

By actively participating in ASCC, Vietnam has leveraged cultural activities and policies to build bridges with neighboring ASEAN countries. This cultural connection reflected Vietnam's unique heritage and created a shared sense of ASEAN identity and solidarity. Through festivals, exhibitions, and educational exchanges, Vietnamese culture has become a tool for dialogue, mutual understanding, and conflict prevention. Cultural diplomacy has helped ease tensions and prevent misunderstandings. Vietnam has supported a peaceful and stable regional environment by celebrating diversity and promoting cultural exchanges. ASCC has encouraged member countries to cooperate in cultural preservation, social progress, and inclusive development. Vietnam's participation is evident through hosting ASEAN cultural exchange events (ASEAN Arts and Culture Festival, AYCF), digital initiatives (ACHDA), and promoting creative industries.

Thus, "International cultural integration, especially within ASEAN, has helped Vietnam spread values, enhance mutual understanding and contribute to regional peace and stability"<sup>1</sup>.

*Fifth, Vietnam advocates implementing cultural policies as a fundamental condition for developing the national economy towards a sustainable future, according to the goals of the United Nations agenda.*

The modifications of Vietnam's cultural policies reflected the guiding principles of the ASCC Blueprint 2025. Vietnam's application of programs to promote cultural diversity, social cohesion, and sustainable growth demonstrated Vietnam's commitment to regional integration and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) [24].

One of the effective measures is that Vietnam has proposed integrating cultural elements into issues such as climate change mitigation, post-pandemic recovery (late 2020), and education on sustainable development.

Regarding SDG 4, since 2018, Vietnam has integrated cultural education into public school curricula and extracurricular activities. Specifically, the 2018 General Education Program, which the Ministry of Education and Training issued, emphasised integrating cultural, historical, and traditional artistic elements into subjects such as Literature, History, Geography, Fine Arts, and Experiential Activities. Simultaneously, Circular No. 20/2018/TT-BGDĐT, Promulgating regulation on professional standards for Teachers of general education institutions, also mentioned the capacity to integrate local culture in teaching. These programs have promoted respect for cultural diversity among the younger generation [25].

Vietnam affirmed that cultural heritage is the foundation of national identity, a bridge between the past and the present, and an important resource for sustainable development. One of the prominent initiatives is the ASEAN Heritage Parks, which combine nature conservation and the preservation of indigenous cultural values. Vietnam has also linked its cultural initiatives with sustainable development efforts. The government has promoted environmentally friendly tourism, responsible urban planning, and the preservation of historical relics. Specifically, implementing the conservation of Hoi An - a UNESCO-recognized world cultural heritage - was considered a model for sustainable urban development (SDG 11); building Green Cities in Da Nang and Can Tho, demonstrating the combination of cultural heritage and sustainable urban development.

Hence, initiatives to promote cultural education, youth engagement, gender equality, and community projects have become top priorities in linking cultural policy with social development. These policies have aligned with ASEAN's vision of a people-centred community and reflect a commitment to promoting social cohesion, inclusion, and sustainable development.

<sup>1</sup> Decision No. 161/QĐ-TTg dated January 25, 2016, of the Prime Minister on the Project on developing and implementing the Plan to implement the goals of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community by 2025

### 3. Conclusion

Thus, before joining ASCC (December 31, 2025), Vietnam clearly identified the protection and promotion of cultural heritage as the foundation of the country's development policy, and cultural development must be closely linked to socio-economic development and international cooperation in line with the global trend of globalization.

After joining ASCC, Vietnam has demonstrated that the country's policy framework has been more in harmony with the broader goals of ASEAN. However, Vietnam has promoted the need to harmonise and preserve cultural identity to avoid the risk of assimilation and loss of traditional cultural values when integrating internationally. During this period, the government has elevated culture to a strategic level; it has been a social construction measure and a strong catalyst for economic development, especially for the cultural industry and cultural tourism. Hence, culture has become the country's "soft power" to promote peace and stability, especially in digital transformation and globalisation. Finally, according to the goals of the United Nations agenda, Vietnam has considered culture a necessary condition for developing the national economy towards a sustainable future.

With the adjustment of cultural policies since joining ASCC, and with the country's efforts, culture has become a necessary factor for socio-economic development, narrowing the gap between communities, stabilising security and politics, supporting peace, and enhancing Vietnam's position in the international zone.

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