



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Repositioning Đông Hồ Folk Woodblock Printings Within East Asian Cultural Interactions: From National Heritage to Global Heritage Discourse

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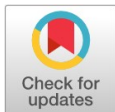
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Abstract— Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings are a representative form of Vietnamese traditional art that reflects the cultural life and aesthetic thinking of the Red River Delta communities. Previously, studies on Đông Hồ prints have largely approached the tradition from the perspective of conventional art history, with limited engagement with intercultural contexts and contemporary theoretical frameworks. This study approaches Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings through the theories of “the social life of things” and “the invention of tradition,” aiming to clarify the cultural, historical, and identity values of this art form in relation to Chinese New Year paintings, Japanese Ukiyo-e, and Korean Minhwa. Simultaneously, the study analyzes the transformation of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings from a traditional craft village art form to a National Intangible Cultural Heritage element and its subsequent inscription on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. This article employs qualitative research methods including analysis, comparative literature review, semi-structured interviews, and non-participatory observation. The results show that Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings both preserve Vietnamese cultural identity and demonstrate cultural exchanges with East Asia through their technique, content, and aesthetic value. The research contributes to a new theoretical perspective and proposes directions for preserving and promoting the value of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in the contemporary context and the context of international integration.

Index Terms— Cultural identity, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, East Asian culture, Intangible cultural heritage, Invention of tradition, Social life of things

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Introduction

Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints are a type of folk painting using traditional hand-printed woodblock techniques, developed in a cradle of traditional culture with a long history (Vũ & Nguyễn, 2014). It originated in Dong Ho village (also known as Ho village), located 40km north of Hanoi, in Song Ho commune, Thuan Thanh district, Bac Ninh province, Vietnam. According to Vietnamese tradition, during the Lunar New Year, every household buys folk paintings to hang up, hoping for a prosperous, happy, and peaceful new year.

During the years of resistance and national defense against French and American invasions, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings demonstrated enduring vitality and flexible adaptation to the historical and social conditions of each period. War was one of the most devastating periods in Vietnam’s history, affecting every aspect of life. Despite that, the Dong Ho folk paintings’ tradition was still preserved, as it was regarded as

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an essential part of the nation's cultural identity and heritage. During the French colonial period, printing paper and pigments were imported into Vietnam. As a result, Dong Ho artisans developed a new type of painting: The outlines were printed on a French kind of paper, which was commonly called "manh" by the Vietnamese (from the French word "main", which means a bundle of paper), and then coloured with pigments which were also imported from abroad. Shortly afterward, when the Dap Cau paper factory began operating, the Dong Ho folks started using paper produced there for their paintings, with each consisting of four sheets measuring approximately 40 × 140 cm (Quỹ Hỗ trợ bảo tồn di sản văn hóa Việt Nam, 2024). According to Appadurai (1988), material objects do not only have fixed economic or aesthetic value. They have a "social life," carrying different values as they circulate among people, places, and contexts. No domestic literature has yet examined Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints from this perspective. On the other hand, in 2012, Dong Ho folk paintings were recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage. By 2025, the craft of making Dong Ho folk paintings will be included in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. Accordingly, "Living heritage is important because it gives communities and individuals a sense of identity and continuity" (UNESCO, 2019). This perspective aligns with the theory of "The Invention of Tradition" (Hobsbawm, 2012), which consider traditions not as static, but as constantly changing, adapting, and restructuring to suit contemporary contexts. Many scholars view heritage not just as a static object but as a dynamic cultural process (Smith, 2020). They argue that they should be understood in terms of time (as a process), and that the Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints, as a "living entity" circulating across different historical and cultural contexts, constitute a significant academic gap that needs to be addressed. The aforementioned documents further reinforce the need for research on the "social life" and "traditional recreation" of Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints as they develop from national heritage to a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Furthermore, the trend of globalization and UNESCO's program for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage places new demands on the preservation and promotion of traditional values. Heritage sites are not confined to national boundaries and are preserved in their original state, but are considered in relation to the region based on geographical environment, historical and cultural origins, and socio-cultural concepts (Yang, 2025). Approaching Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints as a "cultural bridge" between countries in the region to understand their cultural identities through an intercultural and global perspective is extremely necessary. To address these issues, the study aims to determine the cultural value and "social life" of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, as well as analyze the East Asian cultural exchange in materials, techniques, and artistic ideas expressed through typical folk paintings of countries in the region, including Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings (Vietnam), Ukiyo-e paintings (Japan), Minhwa paintings (Korea), and New Year paintings (China). The paper aims to answer three core questions:

- **RQ1:** How are the cultural and artistic values, and the changes in technique, content, and form of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, manifested in the process of development from a traditional craft village to becoming a (VICAST, 2025) and being inscribed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (UNESCO, 2025)?
- **RQ2:** How do Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings reflect East Asian cultural exchange? How is its cultural identity expressed?
- **RQ3:** What specific measures are needed to preserve Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in the current context?

This paper makes certain contributions. Theoretically, this study supports and extends the theories of "The social life of things" and "The Invention of Tradition," offering a new perspective on Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints and thereby revealing their cultural identity and continuous evolution. Furthermore, the article makes a significant contribution to promoting the cultures of countries in the region and enhancing the cultural identity of various art forms in each nation, providing a basis for heritage preservation strategies in the context of globalization.

Literature Review

Research literature related to cultural identity and heritage

In cultural and artistic studies, the concept of cultural identity plays a foundational role in interpreting the relationship between communities, creative practices, and heritage. Schwartz et al. (2011) provide diverse approaches that help to explain identity not only at the individual level but also within social structures and cultural practices. Al Zadjali (2024) also clarifies the social role of art. In this context, art is recognized as a tool for social cohesion, playing an important role in heritage preservation and fostering intercultural interaction. The relationship between identity and adaptability to folklore is further elucidated by Hai et al. (2025). They provide evidence of a positive association between national identity and cultural adaptation, with social distance as a mediator and social support as a moderator. The results of this study indicate that folklore practices, such as traditional arts, rely very much on the social conditions for people to interact and to form a community.

The literature also addresses cultural heritage from legal and policy perspectives, with particular interest in the legal frameworks and policies that ensure cultural heritage is authentic, including the Vietnamese Law on Cultural Heritage (1992, amended 2009) and UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003). In recent years, the concept of heritage has gone through a lot of changes, particularly in the case of intangible cultural heritage. Heritage is not only something that must be preserved in its original form, it is a cultural process that is dynamic as well (Smith, 2020). Discussing UNESCO's contemporary approach to culture, Bortolotto (2007) emphasizes two keys aspects: The dynamic nature of culture, and the continuous performance and recreation of cultural expressions. Consequently, cultural expressions are increasingly viewed not as static objects but as ongoing processes. This attitude has also influenced the way heritage conservation is being done. Gilman (2022) explores the conflict between the essence of cultural conservation and the public display of heritage in the context

of the convention of (UNESCO, 2003). The author states that enforcement policies are often focused on aspects that can be monetized or publicly shown, but not on what the community cares about, like ethics or degradation. This tension between conservation and economic development is illustrated in collision or collaboration: Archaeology encounters economic development (Gould, 2016), where the chapter on the education of UNESCO World Heritage and sustainable development focuses on this issue. These analyses demonstrate that international recognition of heritage depends on the ability to balance cultural values, community interests, and long term development objectives.

Regarding theoretical issues related to policy and practice concerning intangible cultural heritage, Stefano (2021) provide guidance on best practices that consider the limitations of the UNESCO-ICH model for preserving “living heritage”. In the current context, conservation efforts are moving towards closely linking cultural heritage, creativity, and innovation Larsen and Bideau (2026), integrating Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) conservation into educational systems Labrador (2022), community-based conservation Fariss et al. (2023), applying digital technology in the creation of cultural heritage handicrafts Wang and Alli (2025), considering market participation as a mechanism to help heritage practices maintain social relevance and economic viability DeSilvey and Harrison (2020), and especially shifting the perspective on heritage from the past to the future (Harrison et al., 2020).

This paper makes several contributions. Theoretically, this study extends and reinforces the theories of “The social life of things” and “The Reinvention of tradition,” contributing a new perspective on Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings when viewed through the lens of these new theories, thereby revealing their cultural identity and continuous evolution. Furthermore, the article contributes to promoting intellectual understanding among countries in the region and enhancing the cultural identity of various art forms in each nation, providing a basis for heritage preservation strategies in the context of globalization.

Literature review on Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings

In Vietnam, scholarship on Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings has developed into a substantial academic tradition, reflecting long standing scholarly interest in this art form as a representative expression of Northern Vietnamese folk culture. A foundational reference for subsequent research is “Imagerie populaire Vietnamiennne” by M. M. Durand and Papin (1960). The Vietnamese translation published in 2018 M. Durand and Papin (2018) further confirms the enduring academic value of this work for studies of Vietnamese folk paintings and Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings. Based on that foundation, subsequent studies on Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings have mainly approached the subject from the perspective of the artisans (Nguyen et al., 2019; Nhung, 2020; Trần & Đỗ, 1996), analyzing the history of their origin, artistic form, themes, and technical processes (Nguyen et al., 2019), and considering them in relation to other Vietnamese folk painting styles according to their intended use (Trang, 2019). Studies conducted after 2000 often address the preservation and promotion of heritage values, such as Bach and Kim (2015), Loan (2020) and Lê (2013) a few applied studies aimed at integrating modern technology into preservation (Phạm, 2022), along with recent projects to digitize Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in a contemporary direction.

Existing scholarship has established a solid foundation for understanding the history, techniques, artisanship, and contemporary transformations of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings. However, most of these studies still approach it within a national context, failing to fully explore the regional and international dimensions or to consider it from the perspectives of “heritage as a cultural process” and “heritageization”.

Research documents related to folk art and East Asian culture

According to Yang (2025), the formation of intangible cultural heritage in East Asia is profoundly influenced by the geographical environment, historical and cultural origins, and socio-cultural concepts. This study provides innovative perspectives and practical methods for the preservation, inheritance, and exchange of ICH culture in East Asia. This is an important theoretical basis for analyzing the correlation between the Đông Hồ folk woodblock print heritage and other folk painting styles in East Asian cultural exchange.

Cultural history indicates that most countries in East Asia are strongly influenced by Chinese culture across almost every field, including language, religion, customs, and art. This argument is supported by Kim and Kim (2024), who compare morphological similarities between Vietnamese folk paintings and Chinese Lunar New Year paintings. This direct comparison provides the necessary database when comparing the content, form, and symbolism of these two types of paintings in our study. Similarly, Olivová (2017) discusses spiritual, religious, and cultural symbols through two main lenses: the philosophical framework of intangible cultural heritage in East Asia and auspicious motifs in Chinese folk printmaking art. Traditional beliefs such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Shamanism are explored for their role in shaping symbolic meanings in East Asian cultural practices through decorative motifs on the borders of Chinese folk prints. In addition, studies on cultural identity and folk adaptation also emphasize that traditional artistic practices in East Asia are deeply connected to social cohesion, collective memory, and processes of cultural transmission across generations (Al Zadjali, 2024; Hai et al., 2025). Many studies on indigenous knowledge have argued that folk art forms should be understood as living cultural practices closely connected to community life. Their value lies not only in their artistic forms or aesthetic qualities but also in their reflection of the relationship between people and the natural environment, their historical experiences, and the cultural knowledge accumulated and transmitted across generations (Abas et al., 2022; Setijanti & Soemarno, 2015). These perspectives provide important theoretical support for interpreting Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings as both a cultural identity marker and a living heritage

practice within East Asian cultural interactions.

In addition, recent studies on folk art from East Asian countries, such as the study exploring folk wisdom and inheritance through a case study of Lunar New Year woodblock prints from Zhuxian town, China (Tian et al., 2023). A series of recent studies, including non-invasive studies on dyes and pigments in Chinese New Year woodblock prints (Zhao et al., 2023), X-ray fluorescence analysis, Raman microscopy, and scanning electron microscopy - pigment energy dispersion spectroscopy in Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock prints for material analysis and dating, have provided valuable insights into East Asian folk art and culture. Following theoretical and practical studies on folk woodblock printing in the region, the exhibition "Breaking Boundaries: Woodblock Printing Practices in a Pan-Asian Context" Lee et al. (2024) explores the idea of breaking boundaries and presents works by 12 artists and art groups from East and Southeast Asia. The exhibition explores the potential for deepening dialogue and collaboration and for artistic practices to deconstruct and break down boundaries.

Although the aforementioned studies provide insightful perspectives on East Asian folk art and culture, they remain fragmented and lack a comprehensive comparative study of typical folk paintings in the region. Regarding Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, there is still an academic gap in researching their cultural identity within the cradle of East Asian culture and the flow of cultural integration. Furthermore, limited studies have examined Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings through the perspectives of globalization, cultural commodification, heritage transformation, and digital heritage practices in the contemporary era (Liu, 2022; Wang & Alli, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The research is based on theoretical foundations, including the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) to identify, guide practices, and preserve the heritage; East Asian cultural philosophy as a basis for analyzing the meaning of symbols, content of artworks, and cultural exchange with countries in the region to form the unique identity of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings; the theory of "The social life of things" to explain the process of heritageization from traditional craft villages to becoming a national intangible cultural heritage and being inscribed by UNESCO; and the theory of "Re-invention of tradition" to explore how artisans have recreated this traditional art by exploiting contemporary themes and adapting it to suit the materials, products, and digital media of the modern era. Accordingly, the function of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings has shifted from use in rituals and decoration to roles in tourism, education, and Building a cultural brand.



Fig. 1 Research Framework of the Paper. Source: Created by Thi Thuy Trang Tran

Based on the theoretical foundations of cultural identity and heritage, interdisciplinary approaches to folk art research, and the objective of clarifying the role and value of Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints in contemporary and regional contexts, the authors develop an integrated research framework for the article (Figure 1). The research framework shows that the central element of the study is the Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in relation to the theories, research objectives, and research context.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method. It compares several cases, including folk paintings from East Asian countries such as Chinese New Year paintings, Ukiyo-e paintings (Japan), Minhwa paintings (Korea), and Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings (Vietnam). The study compares the techniques, themes, forms, and target audiences of these paintings to clarify cultural exchange between East Asian countries and to highlight the cultural identity of Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints. The research combines multiple methods. The synthesis and analysis of secondary data

(academic literature on Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints, Asian folk art, cultural identity, and cultural heritage) provide a theoretical foundation and support the interpretation of the findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2025 and March 2026 across four research sample groups, using interview questionnaires designed to serve specific objectives: Artisans, experts, government officials, and customers. Interviews were recorded (if permitted), participant identities were kept confidential, and their authenticity was verified against participants and academic discussions. The research followed semi-structured interview guidelines developed by the authors, based on qualitative research design principles (Creswell & Poth, 2016) and interview framework development (Kallio et al., 2016). Research ethics were adhered to, with participants' informed consent. The project's objectives, research methods, benefits, and risks were fully communicated to participants. The interviewers received certification from a training program on "Research Ethics in Social and Behavioral Sciences" conducted by the assistant. Prof. Dr. Jakkraphan Khadchumsaeng and Asst. Prof. Dr. Wirat (Khon Kaen University - Thailand) in 2025. A total of 27 interviews were conducted until data saturation. This means that interviews continued until no significant new topics, concepts, or interpretive insights emerged from subsequent participants. Saturation occurred when there was a recurring similarity in the patterns associated with heritage dimension (preservation, commercialization, cultural identity, tourism development, and globalization) across groups of subjects. The following table provides detailed information on the sample, number, criteria, objectives, and length of time for the interviews:

Table I
Explanation of the semi-structured interview procedure Source: Created by Thi Thuy Trang Tran

Sample Group	Quantity	Criteria	Duration	Objectives
Artisans	4	More than 20 years of experience	30-60 minutes	To investigate the cultural, historical, and artistic values as well as the changes in techniques, content, and forms of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings during the heritage-making process (RO1).
Experts	5	More than 5 years of experience	30-60 minutes	To examine Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings within the context of East Asian cultural exchange: cultural interaction and identity formation (RO2).
Officials	3	Holding official positions within the last 10 years	20-30 minutes	To explore policy frameworks and conservation measures for Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings (RO3).
Customers	15	Randomly selected, including both Vietnamese and foreign participants	5-10 minutes	To examine consumer perceptions of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in general and the reinvention of tradition (RO1).

Additionally, the authors conducted non-participant observation during the field research, where they observed and took photos of the artisans demonstrating their painting technique, the interaction between tourists and artisans, and tourists' expressions in carrying out the experiential tourism activity and purchasing and selling Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings. This will enable the recording of natural behaviours and interactions with minimal researcher intervention. The study further employed triangulation of data obtained from interviews, observations in the field, policy documents, academic literature and heritage reports to add rigour to the process. Multiple data sources enabled the cross-checking of interpretations and thus improved the reliability of the study.

In this study, the following interdisciplinary approaches are applied: Heritage studies to understand how cultural values are preserved over time; Cultural anthropology to understand social practices, beliefs and the community life; Historical studies to understand factors that have influenced the changes in technique, content, form and value of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, including war, social institutions, cultural exchange and adaptation between nations. The integration of these fields enables a more comprehensive understanding of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings as a living heritage, as well as the processes of tradition recreation and cultural identity formation within East Asian cultural exchange and globalization.

Research Findings

The origin and value of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in the historical process and heritage preservation

Origin and formation

The woodblock printing technique is believed to have originated in China and spread widely, achieving great success in many countries worldwide, especially in Asia, including Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The history of Vietnamese woodblock printing records that the craft was quite popular in the 12th century (Đỗ, 2001), particularly for the carving and printing of Buddhist scriptures. This was the premise for the emergence of Vietnamese folk paintings (mainly using woodblock printing techniques). In Dong Ho village, the hobby of collecting and printing paintings developed into an independent art form in the 16th century (Trang, 2019). The 17th-18th centuries are considered the golden age, when all 17 families in Dong Ho

village practiced folk painting. With the rapid development of modern printing technology, consumption of hand-carved woodblock prints has declined, and the custom of purchasing folk prints for Tết decoration is waning. The decrease in the succeeding generation of artisans has led to the gradual fading of this traditional craft. In 2012, the state recognized Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, implementing various measures to revive them and “reinvent the tradition” in the contemporary context. Across different historical periods, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings have undergone changes in form and symbolism, demonstrating their rich and flexible “social life”.

Changes in technique, theme, and form of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in the process of heritage preservation

Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings have undergone a persistent process, from being products of traditional agricultural societies, through wars and profound social transformations, to being recreated and adapted to modern society. The above evolution can be best explained in terms of Arjun Appadurai’s social life of things (Appadurai, 1988). Material objects are not “static” and are not merely objects “for beauty’s sake,” the author says. Appadurai’s main concern is how they carry new social, cultural, and economic meanings as they move from setting to setting. Here, Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints are seen not only as a traditional craft but also as a culturally dynamic object that constantly evolves and acquires new meaning in the hands of its makers, users, and across eras and institutions. The changes in technique, theme, form, and meaning at each stage of the evolution of the Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings are embodied in the transitions from a traditional craft village product to a VICAST (2025), and subsequently to an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding by UNESCO (2025) .

In the first stage (from its inception in the 16th century to the 17th-18th centuries), Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings served both as household decorations and as a means of conveying cultural and spiritual meanings. This was the golden age of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printing, as demonstrated by the five-color technique: red, green, yellow, white, and black. Each color used in the painting had a corresponding woodblock (Figure 2a). The layers of color were printed sequentially. The black outlines were printed last, creating the finished work (Figure 2b). The printing colors were made entirely from natural materials: yellow from pagoda tree flowers or gardenia seeds, red from ochre or young bricks, blue from indigo leaves or copper rust, black from bamboo leaf charcoal, and white from scallop shell powder. The paper used for printing the paintings is *Điệp* paper - a type of paper made from the bark of the *Dó* tree (*Dó* paper) but coated with a layer of powder from the shells of the *Diep* (a type of shellfish like a sea scallop), creating a rare shimmering quality. Regarding the subject matter, according to data collected from semi-structured interviews with artisans, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings are products of a traditional agricultural society, reflecting the daily life of the people, focusing on five main themes: devotional paintings, congratulatory paintings, scenes of daily life, historical paintings, and landscape or narrative paintings. These are also the basic genres throughout the development of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings.



(a) Woodblocks



(b) Artwork: “*Dam cưới chuột*” (Rat Wedding)

Fig. 2. Woodblocks and finished Đông Hồ prints Source: (tranhdangdongho.vn., 2026)

In general, the techniques, themes, and forms of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings at this stage constitute the "soul" of the genre and are considered fundamental knowledge when discussing this type of painting. Research documents on Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings all agree on these aspects (Nguyễn, 2025; Nguyn et al., 2019; Nhung, 2020; Trang, 2019). At this stage, their meaning was linked to ritual economics and ethics, valued more for their symbolic value than their material value.

During wartime, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings took on new social meanings and functions that transcended their traditional role during Tet (Lunar New Year). During the resistance wars, especially those against the French (1858-1884; 1945-1945) and the Americans (1954-1975), the paintings were transformed into tools of propaganda and education. The themes of the paintings shifted from daily life and folk tales to images of soldiers, laborers, and national heroes. Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints became a means of propaganda, inspiring the public and fostering the spirit of resistance. The meaning of the paintings no longer remained limited to rituals or decoration but expanded into the political and cultural spheres of the resistance.

The woodblock printing technique was still used, but no longer strictly adhered to as before. During periods when printing paper was scarce, people sometimes used recycled newspaper to print paintings. During the colonial period, when industrial paints and large-format printing paper entered the local market, Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints developed a new genre called "market paintings," which used only black outlines and hand-coloring, sometimes on industrial paper and ink to reduce costs. The book Nguyn et al. (2019) is one of the rare documents that opens a different perspective on the subject matter and techniques of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, which are little known.

After the devastation of war and the socio-economic changes during the transition to a market economy in 1989, traditional Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings declined severely. As Vietnam modernized and urbanized, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings gradually lost their social relevance. Mass-produced calendars and posters replaced hand-printed paintings. The tradition of hanging Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings during Tet (Lunar New Year) has almost disappeared. During this period, hand-printed paintings were marginalized, considered an outdated craft with little practical value in modern society. As a result, by the end of the 20th century, only a few artisan families still maintained the craft, primarily for preservation rather than for livelihood.

Following its recognition as a VICAST (2025), Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings underwent a revival through recreation. As a vivid testament to the "Re-invention of tradition" doctrine, it circulates in modern society as a tourist souvenir, a heritage branding element, and a cultural education tool. The traditional printing technique is still preserved as a distinctive cultural feature of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings. The themes of the paintings have once again expanded, reflecting contemporary life with some newly designed works. Non-participatory observation and semi-structured interviews with tourist groups indicate that contemporary forms of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, such as prints on souvenirs and fashion items, and newly designed paintings with contemporary themes, are attracting the attention and acceptance of young and international tourists, opening economic development opportunities for the craft village. Furthermore, Wang and Alli (2025) demonstrate that digital technologies enhance accessibility, adaptability, and commercial viability, expanding audience engagement and promoting new forms of cultural storytelling. This also represents a new direction for the future of heritage in general and Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in particular. Monitoring social life and the traditional recreation of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in the process of heritage preservation reveals how material culture negotiates between tradition and modernity.

Artistic and cultural value

Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings are created by skilled artisans, embodying both rich folk aesthetics and unique artistic value. The paintings are characterized by strong lines and stylized, simplified figures with lively expressions. The "simultaneous" perspective is employed, without any realistic proportions or perspective, as in Western paintings. The elements of the paintings are organized according to a hierarchy. The main subject is usually depicted larger, and others are placed around it. From a meaning perspective, Đông Hồ printings reflect national cultural values, the philosophy of life, and the aspirations, dreams, and other aspects of Vietnamese individuals. Traditional folk symbols of local culture and beliefs are widely used in Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints. The abundance of pigs and chickens (materials like "Gà mẹ và đàn con" [Mother Hen and Chicks] or "Đàn lợn âm dương" [Yin-Yang Pigs]) represents unity and togetherness and the relationship between family members and the community, reflecting the culture of the countryside and agricultural life. According to Vietnamese custom, at the beginning of the New Year, each family often hangs the "Đại cát" [Great Fortune] print outside their home as an amulet to ward off evil and bring good fortune. It is believed that when the sun rises and the rooster crows, malevolent spirits are frightened by the light and disappear.

With diverse subject matter and a simple, easily understandable, and relatable style of expression, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings address social ills with humor and gentleness, as seen in works such as "Đánh ghen" [The Jealousy Fight], "Đám cưới chuột" [The Mouse Wedding], and "Trê cóc kiện nhau" [The Lawsuit between the Catfish and the Toads]. These works reflect the context of feudal society: class stratification, where the lower class (mice) must pay tribute to the upper class (cats), polygamy, lawsuits, etc. Some Đông Hồ printings also contribute to traditional education and reflect the nation's glorious history through historical themes intended to inspire patriotism, such as "Ngô Quyền đánh giặc" [Ngo Quyen Defeating the Invaders], "Phù Đổng Thiên Vương" [Phu Dong Heavenly King], and "Hai Bà Trưng" [The Trưng Sisters]. Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings carry moral education for the younger generation, promoting respect for teachers and morality (tôn sư trọng đạo) as demonstrated in the works "Thầy đồ cóc" [The Toad Scholar] and "Vinh quy bái tổ" [Returning Home in Glory to Pay Respects to Ancestors]. These philosophies are

rooted in Confucian thought and align with those of several other East Asian nations. The prints depicting the daily lives of farmers are particularly simple and intimate, ranging from scenes of labor and production, such as “Hứng dừa”[Catching Coconuts] and “Mục đồng thổi sáo”[Buffalo Boy Playing the Flute], to festival activities, including “Đấu vật”[Wrestling], “Chọi trâu”[Buffalo Fighting], “Múa rồng”[Dragon Dance], and “Đánh đu”[Swinging]. Overall, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings possess unique artistic value and profound socio-cultural value. They are a prime example of national cultural identity embodied in folk art.

Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in East Asian cultural exchange

Elements of exchange and influence

According to Yang (2025), the context of heritage formation in East Asia shares profound commonalities from three factors: Geography, history, and socio-cultural factors. In this context, East Asian culture - the system of values, ideas, art, and lifestyles in East Asia and parts of Southeast Asia, mainly including China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam - plays a core role. Kim and Kim (2024) state that: “In the past, China played a central role in East Asian culture”. Consequently, many countries in East Asia today are within the sphere of influence of Chinese culture, also known as the “Han culture region,” including Vietnam, Japan, and Korea. The core philosophical foundation is a combination of Confucianism (emphasizing social order and ethics), Buddhism (influencing the worldview and compassion), and Taoism (advocating harmony with nature). Prominent characteristics include the high valuation of family and community, and a simplified, nature-oriented aesthetic reflected in traditional art as well as every aspect of social life. These shared foundations constitute key factors influencing cultural exchange among countries in this region (Kim & Kim, 2024).

On the other hand, according to Chunhao Zhang, from a historical perspective, “human communication can be divided into four main stages: oral communication, written sign communication, print communication, and electronic information communication” (Zhang, 2023). When the Chinese invented paper and the technique of handwritten woodblock printing, the transmission of information shifted from handwriting to printed materials. “The emergence of woodblock printing technology was not merely a means of conveying visual information, but a major avenue for the dissemination of culture and ideas” (Zhang, 2023). The spread of printing technology - from China in the 7th century, to Japan in the 8th century, Korea in the 11th century, and Vietnam in the 12th century - strongly fueled cultural development and exchange among the nations in this region. Thus, the main factors contributing to the interaction and mutual influence among different types of East Asian folk paintings include East Asian cultural philosophy and the dissemination of printing techniques.



(a) Artwork “Em bé ôm cá chép” [Child Hugging a Carp] - Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings. (tranhdangdongho.vn., 2026)



(b) Artwork “Child hugging a fish” - Yangqing New Year Woodblock Prints - China (William Paterson University, 2023)

Fig. 3. Similarity in symbolism in East Asian folk paintings

Common factors

Having formed and developed within the same region, East Asian countries share similar natural conditions, socio-cultural backgrounds, and histories. This leads to similarities in content, form, aesthetic value, and artistic value of East Asian folk painting styles.

Thematically, Asian countries are influenced by East Asian culture, which differs from Western culture in aspects such as agricultural culture (a civilization linked to major rivers), nature worship, fertility beliefs, the vigorous development of folk culture, the village-commune model, community spirit, and so forth. Furthermore, East Asian nations such as Japan, Korea, and North Korea are all influenced by the philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Consequently, folk prints in these countries, as in Vietnam, commonly feature themes such as respecting teachers and morality, promoting ethics, and a series of calligraphy prints (e.g., sets such as “Nhân - Nghĩa - Lễ - Trí - Tín” [Benevolence - Righteousness - Propriety - Wisdom - Trust] or “Vinh hoa - Phú quý” [Glory - Wealth], etc.). They also feature themes of exorcising evil spirits (such as the “Gà đại cát” [Great Fortune Rooster] Đông Hồ folk woodblock print, and the “Door Gods” print in the Chinese Taohuawu New Year prints).

Folk prints from Vietnam, China, and Japan are similarly characterized by symbolic imagery and conventional visual forms. For example, the motif of the “child hugging a fish” demonstrates a cultural similarity but carries distinct symbolic meanings. In Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings (Vietnam), the work “Em bé ôm cá chép” [Child Hugging a Carp] symbolizes wealth, academic success, and career advancement (Figure 2a). Meanwhile, the “child hugging a fish” motif in the woodblock New Year prints from Yangliuqing village (China) signifies abundance and prosperity (Figure 2b). Another example of symbolism in Asian folk prints is found in Korean Minhwa (Folk Painting), where the tiger represents the aristocracy, while the magpie symbolizes the common people. The Hojakdo/Kkachgi Horang [Magpie and Tiger] painting satirizes social class divisions during the Joseon period. Similarly, the element of satire appears in Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings through the work “Đám cưới chuột” [The Mouse Wedding], where the cat symbolizes the feudal official class, and the mouse, representing common individuals, is depicted in a state of fear, offering tribute to the cat in hopes of a peaceful wedding ceremony.

Asian folk prints, including Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, are characterized by a compositional logic that differs from that of Western painting. They are frequently not represented realistically or through linear perspective, and often employ ‘hierarchical’ scale, where the main subject is drawn large, and the smaller elements are drawn small. Furthermore, the philosophy of Yin-Yang, the “Five Elements” [Wuxing], and the cyclical view of life are prominent features in Asian folk prints. This is demonstrated through the selection of themes (such as spring, summer, autumn, winter; the Four Seasons; and representations of beautiful women), the use of print series (sets of two, four, or five prints), the inscriptions or “ming wen” on the prints, and the couplet format within prints belonging to the same set (“Tiến tài - Tiến lộc” [Progress in Wealth - Progress in Prosperity], “Văn minh - Tiến bộ” [Civilization - Progress], “Vinh hoa - Phú quý” [Glory - Wealth], etc.), as well as the color coordination (incorporating warm and cool colors) and the compositional balance (complementary filling).

In summary, the prominent similarities among East Asian folk art styles include aesthetic elements (strong colors, decisive lines and flat composition, symbolism, hierarchy), technical elements (woodblock printing techniques allowing for mass production to serve the public), content elements (reflecting the common aesthetic thinking of Eastern folk art such as agricultural thinking, East Asian philosophy), and social function (closely linked to agricultural rituals, folk beliefs and seasonal cycles).

Distinct factors

Besides sharing similarities with other folk painting styles in the region, Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints also possess unique characteristics that enrich the region’s diverse “cultural landscape” and the world’s. Among these, printing paper is a distinctive element that distinguishes Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints from other folk painting styles in Vietnam and Asia. While other Vietnamese and Asian folk prints primarily utilize paper made from tree bark, such as Dó bark (Làng Sinh folk prints), or mulberry bark (Washi paper in Japan, Hanji paper in Korea and North Korea), Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings employ Giấy Điệp (Điệp paper) with its unique surface coating of scallop shell powder mixed with glue. Giấy Điệp is essentially also Giấy Dó made from Dó bark, but it is coated with an additional layer of scallop shell powder mixed with glue, applied with a brush made from pine needles. This process creates an uneven, rough surface and the characteristic shimmer of the scallop shell. Occasionally, after applying the Điệp powder layer, the artisans may also add a layer of color to create a richer background for the print.

In terms of printing technique, although the folk prints of East Asia all use woodblock printing, Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints employ a distinctive stamping technique known as “printing with the block face-down” (sắp ván). This means that during printing, the sheet of paper is placed underneath, and the inked woodblock (which has a handle on the back) is aligned and then pressed down onto the paper, similar to how a stamp is applied. Subsequently, the woodblock is inverted (with the paper still adhering to it), and a dry luffa gourd sponge (xơ mướp khô) coated with beeswax is used to rub evenly over the back of the paper, ensuring the ink adheres properly and creating the finished work. This process is entirely different from the woodblock folk prints of other countries (which primarily use a block face-up, with the paper placed on top, use liquid ink, and may print only the black outline before hand-painting the colors).



(a) "Chăn trâu thổi sáo" ("Buffalo herding and flute playing" - Đông Hồ - Vietnam). Source: (tranhdongho.bacninh, 2025)



(b) "Beauty and the Comb" (Ukiyo-e - Japan) Source: (Inako, 2016)



(c) "Harmony" (Taohuawu New Year paintings - China). Source: (Sinh, 2016)



(d) Hojakdo/ Kkachi Horang (Minhwa - Korea). Source: (Ha, 2021)

Fig. 4. Some artworks showcasing typical themes of East Asian folk painting styles.

In terms of themes, Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints feature a wide range of subjects that align with the aesthetics of the working class, including prosperity, fertility, academic success, respect for teachers and morality, scenes of labor and production, patriotism, and satire of bad habits. Ukiyo-e paintings (Japan), originally meaning "a new era in painting", led to different themes. Ukiyo-e artworks embraced a contemporary style, celebrating joy and everyday life, including themes such as beautiful women, landscapes, warriors/heroes, Kabuki actors, and shunga, and departing from traditional philosophies. Another genre of Japanese folk painting after Ukiyo-e is Otsu-e, characterized by satire that depicts human foolishness and humor. Typical motifs include demons or the thunder god. Among these, "The Demon Chanting Buddha's Name" is the most famous example. China, Taohuawu New Year paintings primarily express traditional Chinese folk aesthetics, including auspiciousness and festivities, folk life, opera stories, flowers, birds, insects, fruits, and warding off evil spirits. Minhwa paintings (Korea), literally meaning "folk

painting” or “painting of the people”, share thematic similarities with Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings. These paintings, created by anonymous artists, feature symbolic imagery reflecting a desire for health, prosperity, and abundance. Popular Minhwa themes include the ten symbols of longevity (crane, turtle, deer, mushroom, rock, water, clouds, sun, moon, pine tree), twin birds (symbolizing love and marriage), insects and flowers (representing yin-yang harmony), and bookshelves (symbolizing knowledge and wisdom).

The clientele for these folk painting genres is also diverse. Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings (Vietnam) and Minhwa paintings (South Korea) catered to the poor working class, whereas the clientele for Taohuawu paintings (China) and Ukiyo-e paintings (Japan) included urban residents, intellectuals, and wealthy merchants. Based on aesthetics and customer needs, the themes, sizes, and designs of different painting styles also vary.

Thus, based on the similarities and differences between Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings and the folk paintings of other East Asian countries, the overall “picture” of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings within East Asian cultural exchange can be observed, affirming it as a “bridge” for cultural exchange in the context of globalization.

Below is a comparison table of the folk painting styles from Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, and China, based on differences in printing techniques, paper materials, themes, symbolism, and clientele, to illustrate this overall picture (Table II).

Table II
Distinctive features of East Asian folk painting schools.

Country/ Painting Name	Folk	Printing Paper	Printing Technique	Themes	Symbols	Target Audience
Vietnam (Đông Hồ)		Điệp paper (made from Dó paper coated with seashell powder)	Woodblock printing, reverse printing molds	Blessings (happiness, prosperity), labor and production, historical illustration, satire	Pig, rooster (prosperity, family sentiment), toad (earth deity), carp (success), turtle (longevity), buffalo (social hierarchy), cat (civil servant), mouse (satire)	Common people
Korea (Minhwa)		Hanji paper (made from mulberry tree bark)	Woodblock printing, reverse molds	Longevity, wisdom, prosperity, love, satire	Symbols of longevity (pine tree, crane, water, cloud, sun, moon), lovebirds (marital harmony), insects and flowers (harmony of yin-yang), bookshelf (knowledge and wisdom), tiger (upper class), magpie (common people)	Common people
China (New year paintings)		Paper from tree bark (unspecified type); ancient materials include ramie, hemp, fish nets	Woodblock printing, reverse molds	Blessings, festivals, New Year celebrations, folk tales, warding off evil spirits	Zhong Kui (demon slayer), longevity peach, wealth deity, carp (prosperity)	Common people
Japan (Ukiyo-e)		Washi paper (made from kozo, gampi, or mitsumata bark)	Woodblock printing, reverse molds, multi-color printing	Praising real-life beauty, pleasure-seeking life, escape from traditional constraints	Beautiful women, fashion, landscapes, kabuki actors, shunga (erotic art)	Urban citizens, middle class

Source: Created by Thi Thuy Trang Tran

The cultural identity of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings

Through cultural exchange with East Asia and the adoption of woodblock printing techniques from China, Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints have been localized, from the paper materials and plant-based dyes to the content and imagery that deeply reflect the soul and daily life of the Vietnamese people. According to expert assessments in semi-structured interviews, the cultural identity of Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints is built on a combination of local materials, stories imbued with cultural values, and the communal aspect of production. Most importantly, the materials used are local: Do paper from Dong Cao village; clam shells purchased from Quang Ninh and Hai Phong; Thet brooms used to apply clam powder to the paper, produced in Dao Khe village next to Đông Hồ village; and pigments made from minerals and plants in Sieu Loai district. All these indigenous plants and mineral-based pigments have created a unique language for the Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings. Moreover, the stories and cultural values embedded in the paintings clearly reflect the worldview of the farmers of the Northern Delta (Vietnam). Although originating from Chinese woodblock prints and heavily influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, the distinctiveness of Vietnamese folk paintings lies in the spiritual values embedded within them: valuing family affection, gratitude to ancestors, upholding worldly peace, and the great national pride of the Vietnamese people. According to Kim and Kim (2024), “when folk production experience, knowledge, and techniques are accumulated and reflected through many generations, a process of localization takes place, in which the essence of Vietnamese spirit and culture is infused” (p. 383).

This study also addresses the unique and powerful expression of the Vietnamese people's spirit of resistance and strong will for independence, deeply embedded in the process of absorbing Northern (Chinese) culture. Although borrowing forms of expression from China (such as armor, weapons, horses, and elephants), Vietnamese artists used these very forms to portray their national historical heroes (such as Hai Bà Trưng, Bà Triệu, and Trần Hưng Đạo). These figures were all leaders who resisted the domination or invasion of the North (Kim & Kim, 2024).

On the other hand, according to most visitor reviews of Dong Ho village, Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints make a particularly strong impression and are recognizable for their unique handcrafted woodblock printing technique, natural and rustic colors, and strong lines. Here, folk aesthetics is approached through stylization and conciseness, making it suitable for modern graphic design. Therefore, new designs that apply Đông Hồ printings to handicrafts, souvenirs, fashion items, etc., are well-received and appreciated by young people and international tourists without losing the inherent identity of Dong Ho paintings.

The reinterpretation and re-contextualization of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings is more and more noticeable as they enter other social and cultural settings. Local meanings will not always be conveyed to new audiences. Among many Vietnamese, including those of the Red River Delta where the tradition started, the paintings are linked to folk beliefs, seasonal celebrations and recall of rural life. But in the context of international exhibitions, museums, or cultural exchange programs, the viewer tends to first be captivated by their visual aspects, like the use of colors, woodblock printing and handmade quality. This change in interpretive context is not a process of value loss, but an indication of the cultural value of cultural heritage in the process of multi-cultural transfer. Meanwhile, the enjoyment of the paintings' beauty does not adequately reveal the historical and social aspects of the paintings. Hence, the museum, the gallery or the cultural institution is an important intermediary that offers background information, cultural interpretation and context that allows viewers to interact with the works beyond what is seen.

Previous studies have discussed Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in the fields of art history, folk aesthetics, and cultural heritage (M. Durand & Papin, 2018; Vũ & Nguyễn, 2014). However, there have been less research that examining the process through which the paintings are transformed, interpreted and circulated in modern processes of globalization and cross-cultural exchange, especially in the interconnected cultural landscape of East Asia. By addressing this issue, the present study examines Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings as a form of living cultural heritage whose meanings continue to be shaped through interactions among local traditions, regional cultural networks, and global cultural flows.

Current preservation situation and challenges

Current state of preservation

Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings have preserved traditional cultural and artistic values for over 500 years. However, due to its rich "social life", it has always been flexible, adapting to the times. colors, contemporary artisans have expanded the original palette of five basic colors by mixing new shades. In terms of subject matter, alongside traditional works, subsequent generations of artisans have created artworks with contemporary themes. In terms of format, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings are currently produced in various forms, such as being pasted onto bamboo blinds, printed on notebook covers, and enlarged for the tourism, souvenir, and home décor markets.

Currently, thanks to proactive conservation measures such as the establishment of the Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings Vninet (n.d.) and vietnamnet (2023); community tourism programs, experiential education, and the recreation of the painting market (chợ tranh); as well as the digitization of patterns and motifs, 3D modeling, and the application of AR/VR technology in museums; and the application of Đông Hồ print motifs/materials in other fields like graphic design, fashion, ceramics, and music, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings has become the most widely recognized folk print genre in Vietnam. Generations of young artisans have continuously strived to bring Vietnamese folk printmaking's cultural identity to the world through workshops, exhibitions, academic exchanges, and commercial trade. In the context of integration, cultural exchange, and the explosion of information technology today, there will increasingly be more ways to connect, share, and create regional cultural interactions to promote development and innovation. However, it also raises the issue of tension between cultural authenticity and modernization, requiring each nation to further enhance its awareness of preserving its cultural identity and indigenous knowledge.

Challenges

Despite the bright spots in conservation efforts, Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings still face numerous challenges. The process of industrialization and modernization has led to changing tastes and a limited consumer market. The custom of buying folk paintings to hang during the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, and for worship, has faded away. The communal house in Đông Hồ village - where the "painting market" used to be held - no longer exists. The transition to a market economy and the restoration of religious freedom have made votive paper offerings for religious ceremonies a highly profitable occupation. Most households in Đông Hồ village have abandoned painting in favor of making votive paper offerings.

Regarding the craft village community, the number of artisans is declining sharply. During its heyday (17th-18th centuries), the entire Đông Hồ craft village had 17 clans with over 500 households all producing paintings. According to 2024 statistics from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam, only 2 clans, each with 3 households, in Đông Hồ village still produce paintings. There are 8 master craftsmen responsible for the crucial stages of production. 30 individuals can perform other minor tasks. Of these, only 20 specialize in painting. The rest consider

painting as a side job during their leisure time. The older generation of master craftsmen is aging, while the fourth generation is still young, leading to a risk of a shortage of successors.

Changes in the natural environment have made the raw materials for Dong Ho paintings scarcer and harder to access. The technique of making printing inks from red ochre, bamboo leaves, scallop shells, pagoda tree flowers, indigo leaves, etc., requires a lot of time and meticulousness, so few people can do it, driving up the cost of raw materials. Regarding the paper used for printing Đông Hồ paintings, statistics show that only 4 households in Dong Cao village (Bac Ninh province) currently make Dó paper. These difficulties lead some people to use low-quality printing inks and paper, affecting the quality of the paintings and the product's sales. In addition, the hot, humid climate in Vietnam poses difficulties for preserving woodblock printing plates due to a lack of means and techniques. These printing plates are considered heirlooms passed down from ancestors to descendants. However, due to war, natural disasters, climate, and a lack of preservation methods and techniques, a large number of ancient printing plates have been damaged.

At the same time, the increasing influence of globalization, market expansion, and digital technologies presents several challenges to the preservation of Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints. Issues of cultural meaning, commercial prioritization, and the appropriation of traditional motifs in new cultural contexts may arise as the paintings enter new markets. The culture and economic sustainability of the tradition need to be protected in the future, and these trends underscore that need.

Discussion

The results indicate that there is a need to coordinate efforts among several parties to help preserve folk woodblock printings of Đông Hồ in the long term. The continuity of the tradition is often linked for the local artisans and craft communities with the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next. In addition to documenting technical skills, documentation of production processes, symbolic meanings, and local knowledge can boost community participation and cultural continuity of the craft. Innovation, on the other hand, is key, but only if, with the advent of new forms of adaptation, there are still meaningful links with the cultural values contained in the tradition.

A policy perspective is more integrated and longer-term approaches may be needed to tackle the issues affecting the heritage. Financial support, cultural funding, tax relief and sustainable tourism planning are all aspects of measures that can help to alleviate the pressure of market-driven commercialization and boost the economic situation of artisans. There is a need to balance the economic opportunities and the protection of cultural values in environments where tourism development and growing digital reproduction are taking place.

Another area of heritage transmission is educational institutions. The use of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in various academic curricula, such as art, history, cultural studies, cultural management and creative industries, can help reinforce public awareness and promote wider greater public engagement among younger generations. Collaboration between schools, universities, museums, and local communities can also help support experiential approaches to learning through the link between heritage and contemporary social issues.

In the preservation and interpretation of the tradition, museums and cultural institutions play an important mediating role. Exhibitions, digital documentation and international exchanges can enhance access to Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings and enable new possibilities for cultural dialogue through collaborative efforts. However, as digital technologies gain popularity, issues of cultural ownership, representation, and heritage representation in virtual environments also need to be addressed.

International organizations, such as UNESCO and regional cultural networks, can help at the international level by supporting community-based approaches to the conservation of cultural heritage. International recognition can be most effective if it is linked to mechanisms that reinforce local participation, help to preserve traditional knowledge systems and foster equitable cultural cooperation. This would consider the needs and experiences of the people who continue to practice and pass on heritage and help to ensure that the preservation of heritage extends beyond symbolic recognition.

Contributions, limitations and research directions

It can be asserted that Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings is not merely a cultural heritage of Vietnam but also functions as a "common voice" within the Asian cultural identity - a space for the intersection and convergence of East Asian cultural essence, the harmony of humanistic philosophy, and the principle of human beings living in equilibrium with nature and always striving for good fortune. Theoretically, from an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective, based on theoretical frameworks and international conventions on heritage, this paper contributes to the existing documentation on East Asian folk paintings in general and Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in particular. The research benefits the local community by promoting the cultures of countries in the region and enhancing the cultural identity of folk-art forms in each country. In particular, the paper provides in-depth analysis of cultural exchange between folk painting styles of East Asian countries and outlines a strategic roadmap for conservation to promote the practice and preservation of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings in the future.

There are some limitations to consider when interpreting the results of this study. First, the analysis is based on the Vietnamese perspective and the materials used are mostly document-based. Therefore, the study does not adequately represent the experiences and perspectives of practitioners of other traditional printing traditions in East Asia. More dialogue with artisans and cultural producers and heritage experts

from other regional settings could help to provide a deeper appreciation of the cross-cultural aspects of similarities and differences in heritage transformation. Another issue that is given relatively less attention in the research is the economic aspects of heritage production, such as how the creative industries and cultural entrepreneurship affect the current development of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings, and how marketization has influenced it. Further research is needed on the impact of digital media platforms and online marketplaces, as well as transnational cultural circulation.

These limitations suggest several avenues for future research. Interdisciplinary studies might focus on the impact of new technologies – such as digital archives, virtual exhibitions, social media and artificial intelligence – on the preservation, interpretation and dissemination of traditional cultural heritage. This research might also be used to inform ongoing studies on public perceptions of heritage, behaviors of youth, cultural tourism and local communities, and socio-economic considerations on how to ensure long-term sustainability of the livelihoods of artisans. These insights would help to gain a fuller picture of how traditional cultural practices evolve in a rapidly changing social, technological and economic landscape.

Conclusion

The results of this study have shown that Đông Hồ folk woodblock prints are traditional folk-art forms in Vietnam, but at the same time they are also dynamic cultural heritage assets and the result of exchange and interaction among people through history and in the modern world, in East Asia. Both as a product of art and as a “carrier of memory”, embodying an intermingling of culture values, folk beliefs, and community life, each print is a product. They show interaction between persons and heritage and how Vietnamese communities build, maintain and reconstruct their identity through the generations. The research demonstrates that Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings continually incorporate, modify and reimagine cultural, symbolic and economic values in various historical and social contexts, from the point of view of heritage research, transnational cultural interaction, and through the theoretical lens of “the social life of things” and “the invention of tradition”. Moreover, while sharing certain characteristics with and remaining distinct from folk painting styles in the region, such as the painting styles of China, Korea and Japan, which further emphasizes the unique aesthetic, symbolic and worldview values of Dong Ho paintings within the regional art landscape.

The results of the research also show that the modern re-creation of the Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings has generated additional space for the preservation of culture, the development of tourism, with educational activities and the promotion of international culture. The study also identifies several key issues, however, such as commercialization, the declining number of participating artisans, shift in consumers’ behavior, commodification of culture and culture versus modernization. The problems indicate that the heritage preservation process does not just involve the protection of static traditions, but negotiations between continuity, adaptation and transformation built around the market. It is a journey of affirmation of the aesthetic and cultural values of Đông Hồ folk woodblock printings and the role of Vietnamese culture in the world discourse from the traditional craft village to the VICAST (2025) and its inscription on UNESCO’s List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (UNESCO, 2025). This process not only seeks to elevate the value of the heritage but also affirms Vietnam’s role in preserving and recreating East Asian cultural heritage in the contemporary era.

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Conflict statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research.

Ethical practice

Research ethics were followed, including obtaining informed consent from participants. The interviewees were certified in a training program on “Research Ethics in Social and Behavioral Sciences.”

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