

Valorising Heritage through Cultural Industries and Destination Branding: A Case Study of the Trang An Landscape Complex, Ninh Binh, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Heritage sites are increasingly expected to generate cultural, social and economic value while safeguarding authenticity, integrity and community meaning. This article examines how the outstanding universal value of the Trang An Landscape Complex is converted into experiential, cultural-industry and destination-brand value. The study adopts a qualitative document- and policy-analysis approach, triangulating international scholarship, Vietnamese legal and policy documents, UNESCO materials and case-specific secondary evidence. An integrated analytical framework links heritage capital, experience design, cultural and creative industries, and destination branding, while treating authenticity, community agency, sustainability and responsible digitalisation as cross-cutting safeguards. The findings show that Trang An possesses a strong stock of natural and cultural heritage capital, reinforced by rapid visitor growth, international recognition and a distinctive public-private partnership model. Value is generated not by the physical landscape alone but through interpreted experiences, cultural products, media exposure, storytelling and place-based branding. At the same time, commercialisation, unequal benefit distribution, pressure on the core zone and limited community participation in decision-making may weaken long-term sustainability. The article proposes five orientations: authenticity-based heritage governance, community-centred cultural-industry value chains, coherent destination-brand architecture, more transparent public-private partnership governance, and digital monitoring based on cultural as well as economic indicators.

KEYWORDS: heritage valorisation; cultural industries; destination branding; World Heritage; Trang An; sustainable tourism; Vietnam.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage has moved increasingly from the margins to the centre of destination strategy, cultural tourism and the creative economy. Heritage is no longer treated only as an object to be conserved; it is also approached as a living resource whose cultural, social and economic value can be activated through tourism, education, creative production and place-based development. International tourism literature identifies culture and heritage as important drivers of travel demand, but the expansion of cultural consumption also raises a central management question: how can heritage value be realised and shared without eroding the qualities that make the heritage significant [1]?

Three bodies of theory are particularly relevant to this question. The experience-economy perspective explains how value is increasingly created through memorable, participatory encounters rather than through goods

and services alone [2]. Cultural-capital and creative-economy approaches view heritage as a stock of cultural value that can be maintained, invested in and mobilised along value chains that include interpretation, events, media, design and cultural tourism [3], [4]. Destination-branding research adds a third dimension by showing how places use distinctive assets and narratives to build awareness, associations and competitive reputation [5]. Heritage therefore sits at the intersection of a protected cultural resource, an experiential product and a branding asset.

The Trang An Landscape Complex in Ninh Binh Province provides a particularly relevant case. Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2014, Trang An is Vietnam's first and, to date, only mixed cultural and natural World Heritage property [6]. The property combines a limestone-karst landscape, archaeological evidence of long-term human adaptation and the historical-cultural space associated with the Hoa Lu ancient capital. Its visibility has grown rapidly: according to the provincial tourism authority, Ninh Binh welcomed approximately 8.7 million visitors in 2024 and generated about VND 9.17 trillion in tourism revenue [7]. These developments show that Trang An has become not only a protected heritage property but also a major destination asset.

However, the conversion of heritage value into tourism and cultural-industry value is not automatically sustainable. Existing studies on Vietnamese World Heritage sites point to persistent governance, crowd-management and conservation pressures [8], while research at Trang An indicates that community participation remains largely guided by public authorities rather than organised through substantive co-decision-making [9]. International heritage-governance studies likewise warn that stakeholder participation can remain formal if communities do not share decision-making power or benefits [10], [11]. These tensions are especially important for a mixed World Heritage property because cultural authenticity, ecological integrity, visitor use, local livelihoods and commercial investment must be managed simultaneously.

Against this background, the article pursues three objectives. First, it clarifies the theoretical mechanisms through which heritage value is converted into experiential and cultural-industry value. Second, it analyses the assets and governance mechanisms underpinning Trang An's emergence as a branded destination. Third, it identifies the conditions and policy orientations required for heritage valorisation to remain authentic, community-anchored and sustainable. The contribution of the article lies in integrating experience economy, cultural industries and destination branding within a single framework and applying that framework to a mixed World Heritage property in Vietnam.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Heritage valorisation, cultural capital and sustainable use

Heritage valorisation may be understood as the process of identifying, interpreting, activating and sharing heritage value in ways that enable heritage to contribute to contemporary social and economic life without depleting its cultural significance. This approach differs from a narrow exploitation logic. Throsby conceptualises heritage as cultural capital: a stock that stores cultural value and can generate flows of economic and cultural benefits, but that can also be depleted when use exceeds stewardship [3]. Sustainable valorisation therefore requires reinvestment in the cultural resource base rather than treating heritage as a fixed stock available for extraction.

This argument is strengthened by the view of heritage as a cultural process rather than an inert object. Heritage value is constituted through meanings, practices, memories and uses attached to places, not only through physical fabric [14]. For tourism and cultural industries, this means that economic use remains legitimate only when it supports the continuity of the social and cultural relationships that make the heritage meaningful. Sustainable-tourism research at World Heritage sites accordingly emphasises the need to balance conservation, visitor use, local development and long-term management capacity [12].

2.2. Experience economy and cultural-industry value creation

The experience economy provides a useful explanation of how heritage is converted into visitor value. Pine and Gilmore distinguish four experiential realms - entertainment, education, esthetic experience and escapism - organised around the degree of visitor participation and the nature of the connection with the experience [2]. Heritage destinations can combine these realms through guided interpretation, cultural performances, learning

activities, ritual participation, landscape immersion and place-based storytelling. The implication is that value does not arise from physical access alone; it is shaped by how the encounter is designed and interpreted.

The cultural and creative industries extend this logic from individual experiences to value chains. Creative-economy approaches include cultural sites, performances, media, design, digital content and other activities through which cultural meaning is transformed into products and services [4]. In heritage settings, this value chain can include interpretation, festivals, film and media, local crafts and specialities, design, digital communication and tourism services. Co-creation and locally grounded narratives are important because they deepen engagement and reduce the risk of generic, decontextualised tourism products [16].

2.3. Destination branding and heritage-based reputation

Destination branding concerns the construction of distinctive and credible associations that influence how prospective visitors, investors and other audiences perceive a place. Brand-equity theory emphasises the role of awareness and associations in shaping responses to a brand [13], while destination-branding research shows that places increasingly use culture and identity to differentiate themselves in competitive markets [5]. For heritage destinations, a recognised World Heritage designation can operate as a powerful quality cue, but the durability of the brand depends on congruence between projected image and lived experience.

Heritage branding can also operate at broader territorial and national scales. Cultural assets can contribute to the external image and soft-power profile of a place when the communication is distinctive, credible and anchored in real cultural meaning [19]. Yet branding becomes fragile when it relies excessively on borrowed imagery, spectacle or narratives that are disconnected from the heritage resource. In this sense, authenticity is not only a conservation principle; it is also a condition for long-term brand credibility.

2.4. Community agency, governance and responsible digitalisation

Heritage valorisation involves multiple stakeholders: public authorities, local communities, cultural bearers, researchers, enterprises, tourism operators, media organisations and visitors. Collaborative-governance research suggests that durable heritage management depends on mechanisms that allow these actors to contribute knowledge, resources and decision-making capacity [10]. The critical distinction is between participation as implementation and participation as agency. Where communities merely perform assigned roles, the benefits of valorisation may be distributed unevenly and the local knowledge underpinning the heritage may be marginalised [9], [11].

Digital media and platforms add a further governance dimension. Digitalisation can broaden access, improve interpretation, support monitoring and preserve knowledge, but it can also accelerate simplification and decontextualisation if content is inaccurate or commercially driven. Research on heritage communication therefore highlights the importance of professional verification and community feedback in maintaining the credibility of cultural information [20]. Responsible digitalisation should be treated as a safeguard within the valorisation process rather than as a purely promotional tool.

2.5. Integrated analytical framework

On the basis of these perspectives, the study uses an integrated four-layer framework. The first layer is heritage capital: the natural, cultural and community-held value that constitutes the resource base. The second is experience design: the conversion of that capital into memorable encounters through the four experiential realms, co-creation, interpretation and narrative. The third is cultural industries and destination branding: the scaling of experiential value through creative production, media, cultural products and destination communication. The fourth is a set of safeguards - authenticity, community agency, sustainability and responsible digitalisation - that prevent value creation from drifting into commodification, inequity or resource depletion. The framework assumes that the four layers operate as a system rather than as independent components.

III. APPROACH AND RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a conceptual and policy-oriented qualitative design based on document analysis and synthesis of secondary evidence. It does not rely on a single primary dataset. Instead, the evidence base is

organised into three groups. The first consists of international scholarship on the experience economy, cultural and creative industries, destination branding, sustainable tourism and heritage governance. The second comprises international normative materials and Vietnamese legal and policy documents concerning cultural heritage, tourism and cultural industries. The third includes case-specific evidence on Trang An, particularly UNESCO materials, peer-reviewed studies of tourism management and community participation, and official secondary data on tourism growth and destination development.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the study integrates the principal theoretical strands into a common analytical framework. Second, the framework is applied to Trang An to examine the conversion of heritage value into experiential, cultural-industry and destination-brand value through visitor experiences, creative production, media exposure, governance arrangements and market positioning. Third, the study identifies enabling conditions and risks, with particular attention to authenticity, community agency, benefit distribution, environmental and cultural sustainability, digital communication and institutional coordination.

The approach is interpretive rather than statistical. Quantitative figures are used as contextual indicators rather than as the basis for causal inference. This design is appropriate to the objective of conceptual clarification and policy analysis, but it also limits statistical generalisability. The conclusions therefore concern the mechanisms and governance conditions visible in the Trang An case and should be tested further through visitor surveys, community-based research and comparative studies of other mixed World Heritage properties.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Trang An as heritage capital and a destination asset

Trang An's outstanding universal value rests on the convergence of natural landscape, archaeological evidence, historical memory and living cultural practice. The property covers approximately 6,172 hectares in the Trang An limestone massif and is surrounded by a buffer zone of about 6,628 hectares. It includes three principal components: the Hoa Lu Ancient Capital, the Trang An - Tam Coc - Bich Dong scenic area, and the Hoa Lu special-use primary forest [6]. The karst peaks, submerged valleys and cave systems are combined with archaeological deposits documenting more than 30,000 years of human presence and adaptation and with the historical layer of the tenth-century Hoa Lu capital.

These attributes constitute a deep stock of heritage capital. Importantly, the value is relational and place-bound: it is generated not only by monuments and scenery but also by the interaction between landscape, water, ritual, memory and community attachment. Vietnamese research on residents' topophilia indicates that affective bonds to place can themselves become an important resource for sustainable cultural tourism [15]. This relational quality strengthens the distinctiveness of Trang An because it is difficult to reproduce elsewhere and can support both visitor experience and local identity.

Table 1. Selected indicators of Trang An's heritage and tourism profile

Indicator	Value / description	Evidence base
UNESCO status	Mixed cultural and natural World Heritage property, inscribed in 2014	UNESCO [6]
Core property area	Approximately 6,172 ha	UNESCO [6]
Buffer zone	Approximately 6,628 ha	UNESCO [6]
Principal components	Hoa Lu Ancient Capital; Trang An - Tam Coc - Bich Dong scenic area; Hoa Lu special-use primary forest	UNESCO [6]
Archaeological time depth	Evidence of more than 30,000 years of human presence and adaptation	UNESCO [6]
Visitors in 2024	Approximately 8.7 million visitors to Ninh Binh	Ninh Binh Department of Tourism [7]
Tourism revenue in 2024	Approximately VND 9.17 trillion	Ninh Binh Department of Tourism [7]

Source: Compiled by the authors from UNESCO World Heritage Centre [6] and Ninh Binh Department of Tourism [7].

The rapid growth of tourism indicates that the heritage resource has been successfully recognised and formalised in the market. However, growth also intensifies the fundamental tension of valorisation: the same qualities that create value - landscape integrity, cultural depth, tranquillity and authenticity - can be weakened by excessive visitor pressure or inappropriate commercial development [8]. Because Trang An is a mixed World Heritage property, management must simultaneously protect geological and ecological integrity, archaeological and historical authenticity, and the living cultural practices connected with the site. This dual mandate makes carrying capacity and land-use control particularly important.

4.2. Converting heritage value into experiential and cultural-industry value

The four realms of the experience economy can be identified clearly in Trang An. Entertainment is present in festivals, performances and the observational dimension of boat journeys. Education is generated through interpretation of the Hoa Lu capital, cave archaeology, historical narratives and ecological information. Esthetic experience is produced by immersion in the karst-and-water landscape. Escapist experience emerges when visitors row through submerged caves, follow pilgrimage routes or participate in ritual and place-based activities. The strongest products are those that combine several realms rather than relying on passive sightseeing alone [2].

Two mechanisms strengthen this conversion. First, co-creation increases engagement by allowing visitors to participate, choose and personalise elements of the experience instead of remaining passive consumers [16]. Second, narrative anchors the experience to place. Storytelling that connects the landscape to the Hoa Lu dynasties, local memory and community life can turn tourism consumption into meaning-making and reinforce learning and place attachment [17]. In this sense, interpretation is not a secondary service but an essential link between heritage capital and visitor value.

The cultural-industry value chain extends beyond entrance or boat-service revenue. It includes heritage interpretation and experience design, festivals and events, film and media, digital content, local specialties and crafts, cultural design and the agricultural and village landscapes that support them. These links can reinforce one another when creative production remains anchored in authentic cultural capital and when local producers are able to participate in value creation. Vietnam's current cultural-industries strategy provides a policy context for expanding cultural tourism and creative design, but the effectiveness of this expansion depends on the quality of local linkages and the capacity to preserve the resource base [18].

4.3. Destination branding and the film-tourism episode

Trang An possesses several strong brand assets: the international recognition associated with a UNESCO mixed-heritage designation, a visually distinctive karst-and-water landscape, the historical narrative of Hoa Lu and a broader religious and cultural landscape. From a brand-equity perspective, the World Heritage label increases awareness and provides a quality cue that shapes destination associations [13]. Destination-branding theory further suggests that these assets become durable only when they are coordinated within a coherent story rather than presented as disconnected attractions [5].

The film-tourism episode associated with Kong: Skull Island illustrates both the reach and the risk of media-driven destination branding. Film exposure increased the global visibility of the landscape and demonstrated how cultural-industry media can amplify destination image. At the same time, the temporary use of a reconstructed film set within the heritage area exposed a tension between borrowed cinematic imagery and the conservation values that underpin the site. The key lesson is that media attention can create short-term brand value, but long-term reputation must remain anchored in the authentic cultural and natural landscape rather than in manufactured spectacle.

Trang An also contributes to broader territorial and national cultural positioning. Heritage can function as a soft-power asset by projecting an attractive image of place and cultural distinctiveness [19]. Digital content, documentary media and travel communication further extend this visibility, but cultural accuracy matters because repeated simplification or decontextualisation can weaken the credibility of the brand [20]. A coherent brand

architecture should therefore align the UNESCO mixed-heritage narrative, the Hoa Lu historical narrative, the living cultural landscape and contemporary visitor experiences within a common place-based identity.

4.4. Public-private partnership, community participation and benefit distribution

A distinctive feature of the Trang An case is its governance arrangement. The property is owned and directly managed by the Ninh Binh Provincial People's Committee, while the Xuan Truong Enterprise undertakes conservation, forest restoration and tourism operations within a public-private partnership model. This arrangement has mobilised investment, operational capacity and marketing reach, contributing to rapid destination development and providing resources for conservation activities. For resource-constrained heritage destinations, such a model can offer practical advantages in financing and service delivery.

However, the partnership also creates characteristic governance tensions. Large private investment can accelerate commercialisation, intensify pressure for visitor throughput and influence the distribution of benefits. Comparative research on Vietnamese World Heritage sites stresses the need for continuing attention to crowd management, governance and community impact [8]. At Trang An, community-participation research indicates that residents participate mainly within a government-guided model and have less influence over strategic decision-making [9]. This pattern resembles the wider problem of nominal participation identified in international heritage research [11].

The evidence therefore suggests that the effectiveness of the partnership cannot be assessed by visitor growth or investment alone. Long-term sustainability depends on transparent boundaries between commercial development and core-zone protection, equitable sharing of benefits, monitoring of conservation outcomes and stronger community agency. Where these safeguards are weak, short-term commercial capture can undermine the cultural and ecological assets on which destination value ultimately depends [10], [12].

4.5. Enabling conditions, risks and an integrated framework

Five conditions determine whether valorisation becomes a durable resource. The first is authenticity: commercial staging and communication must remain connected to the meanings, practices and landscapes that constitute the heritage. The second is community centrality: residents and local producers should be active participants in interpretation, cultural production and decision-making rather than decorative elements of the visitor experience. Research in Vietnam indicates that well-designed sustainable tourism can strengthen local awareness of heritage conservation when communities perceive meaningful involvement and benefit [21].

The third condition is environmental, economic and cultural sustainability. Carrying capacity, core-zone protection, local value retention and reinvestment in conservation must be incorporated into performance assessment. The fourth is responsible digitalisation, because digital media can widen access and preserve knowledge but can also magnify inaccurate or superficial representations [20]. The fifth is institutional coordination. Heritage valorisation spans culture, tourism, agriculture, creative production, small business, media and conservation; fragmented governance can therefore weaken the value chain even when individual initiatives are well designed.

Table 2. Integrated framework for sustainable heritage valorisation at Trang An

Layer	Core question	Key mechanisms	Illustration at Trang An
1. Heritage capital	What value is held?	Natural and cultural assets; community knowledge; sense of place	Karst landscape; >30,000-year record; Hoa Lu capital; living ritual
2. Experience design	How is value staged?	Four realms; co-creation; interpretation; narrative	Interpreted boat journeys; festivals; temple and heritage routes
3. Cultural industries and branding	How is value scaled?	Creative production; media and film; destination marketing; place brand	UNESCO label; film-induced tourism; media and cultural content

4. Safeguards	How is value kept sustainable?	Authenticity; community agency; carrying capacity; responsible digitalisation	Core-zone protection; benefit sharing; conservation-oriented governance
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Source: Authors' synthesis based on the experience-economy, cultural-capital, creative-economy and destination-branding literature and the Trang An evidence [2]-[5].

Operationalising the framework requires indicators that go beyond visitor numbers and revenue. Relevant measures include the share of economic value retained by local producers and communities, the proportion of experiences that are community-led or co-created, compliance with carrying-capacity thresholds, reinvestment in conservation, the cultural accuracy of interpretation and digital content, and visitor outcomes such as learning, place attachment and responsible behaviour. Monitoring these indicators would allow managers to identify early signs of commodification or cultural erosion and to negotiate a more balanced relationship between commercial performance, conservation and community outcomes.

V. ORIENTATIONS AND SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE VALORISATION

5.1. Strengthening authenticity-based heritage governance

The first priority is to place authenticity and outstanding universal value at the centre of all development decisions. For a mixed World Heritage property, this requires integrated criteria covering both ecological integrity and cultural-historical authenticity. Visitor infrastructure, interpretation, events, media production and new tourism products should be professionally assessed against these criteria before implementation. Core-zone carrying capacity and buffer-zone development should be monitored continuously so that short-term demand does not erode the landscape and cultural qualities that sustain long-term value [6], [8].

A stewardship principle should also be embedded in financial and operational decisions. Because heritage functions as cultural capital, part of the economic value generated through tourism and cultural industries should be reinvested in conservation, research, documentation, environmental management and the transmission of local cultural knowledge [3]. This would help shift management from a throughput-oriented model toward a resource-maintenance model.

5.2. Developing community-centred cultural-industry value chains

The second orientation is to strengthen the position of local communities and producers within the cultural-industry value chain. Community participation should move beyond implementation toward consultation, co-design and, where appropriate, co-decision-making in matters affecting local cultural resources and visitor experiences [9], [10]. Heritage interpretation, storytelling, local food, crafts, cultural events and community-based experiences can create stronger local retention of value when residents participate as producers and knowledge holders rather than only as labour or service providers.

Benefit-sharing mechanisms should be made more visible and measurable. Management bodies can monitor the proportion of procurement and cultural products sourced locally, the participation of community groups in experience design, the distribution of tourism income across local actors and the resources reinvested in cultural transmission. These indicators would help translate the general principle of community centrality into auditable governance practice and reduce the risk of symbolic participation [11].

5.3. Building a coherent and culturally grounded destination brand

Trang An's brand should be organised around a coherent narrative that links the UNESCO mixed-heritage status, the karst-and-water landscape, the historical depth of Hoa Lu, archaeological evidence and living cultural practice. These elements should reinforce rather than compete with one another. Brand communication should prioritise stories that visitors can verify through on-site experience, because congruence between destination image and lived reality is essential to long-term credibility [5].

Film, digital media and other creative-industry channels should be used as amplifiers rather than substitutes for place identity. Media campaigns can attract attention, but destination reputation should not depend on borrowed cinematic imagery or short-lived promotional spectacles. Storytelling and interpretation should connect

contemporary communication with local history, landscape and community memory, thereby strengthening both visitor meaning and brand distinctiveness [17], [20].

5.4. Improving public-private partnership governance and benefit sharing

The public-private partnership should be strengthened through clearer accountability for conservation, community outcomes and transparency in addition to commercial performance. Partnership agreements and management reviews can incorporate measurable indicators relating to core-zone protection, reinvestment in conservation, local procurement, community participation, visitor pressure and cultural-content quality. This would allow commercial efficiency to be assessed together with the public-interest objectives inherent in World Heritage governance.

Regular multi-stakeholder review should involve public authorities, the private operator, local communities, researchers and conservation specialists. Such a mechanism would provide a structured channel for resolving tensions between visitor growth, investment, community benefit and heritage protection. It would also reduce the risk that decision-making becomes concentrated in the two strongest actors - government and enterprise - while local knowledge and independent professional assessment remain secondary [9]-[11].

5.5. Strengthening digitalisation and evidence-based monitoring

Digital transformation should support documentation, interpretation, visitor management and public communication while maintaining professional and cultural accuracy. Digital heritage content should be verified by relevant experts and, where appropriate, reviewed with community participation before public dissemination. Digital platforms can also be used to collect visitor feedback, monitor pressure on specific routes, support multilingual interpretation and make cultural knowledge more accessible without requiring additional physical intervention in sensitive areas [20].

Finally, destination-performance monitoring should be broadened beyond arrivals and revenue. A balanced dashboard should combine economic indicators with conservation status, carrying capacity, community benefit, local participation, cultural-content accuracy, visitor learning and responsible behaviour. This orientation is consistent with Vietnam's current legal and strategic emphasis on safeguarding heritage while developing cultural industries [18], [22]. It would make sustainability a measurable management objective rather than a general statement of intent.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the valorisation of the Trang An Landscape Complex through the combined lenses of heritage capital, experience design, cultural industries and destination branding. The analysis shows that Trang An's value does not arise from physical assets alone. It is produced through the interpretation and staging of the landscape, cultural and historical narratives, creative-industry linkages, media visibility and the destination reputation associated with World Heritage recognition. The public-private partnership has contributed investment and operational capacity, while the combination of natural and cultural assets provides a distinctive foundation for destination branding.

At the same time, value creation is conditional. Heritage can become a sustainable resource only when authenticity and integrity are protected, local communities participate meaningfully, benefits are distributed along the value chain, commercial development remains within carrying-capacity limits, and digital and media communication stays faithful to the cultural reality represented. The four-layer framework developed in the study - heritage capital, experience design, cultural industries and branding, and safeguards - therefore provides both an analytical structure and a practical management agenda.

The study is limited by its document-based and interpretive design. Its conclusions are grounded in secondary evidence and are not statistically generalisable. Future research should measure visitor experience across the four experiential realms, examine community-centred benefit distribution, assess the effects of digital and film-induced branding on authenticity and responsible behaviour, and compare Trang An with other mixed World Heritage properties. Such empirical work would help determine which elements of the proposed framework are transferable and which remain specific to the governance and cultural context of Trang An.

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