

The Value of Folk Performance Heritage in Thanh Hoa through a Comparative Study of Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng

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ABSTRACT: This article identifies the values and analyzes the current state of safeguarding and promoting folk performance heritage in Thanh Hoa through a comparative study of two representative cases, Trò Xuân Phả (a traditional folk performance/game in Thanh Hóa) and Trò Chiềng (a traditional folk performance/game in Thanh Hóa). Based on an interdisciplinary approach combining cultural management, ethnology, and heritage studies, the article clarifies the historical, cultural-artistic, belief-spiritual, traditional educational, community cohesion, and tourism development values of the two heritages. The findings show that both Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng occupy a special position in the system of folk performances in Thanh Hoa, yet the degree of safeguarding and value promotion remains uneven; prominent issues include a lack of financial resources, disruptions in intergenerational transmission, risks of stage adaptation and commercialization, and insufficiently close coordination among relevant stakeholders. On that basis, the article proposes four groups of solutions aimed at improving institutions, strengthening human-resource transmission, promoting documentation in conjunction with authenticity control, and promoting heritage values on the basis of sustainable tourism and community-based governance.

KEYWORDS - folk performance heritage; Trò Xuân Phả; Trò Chiềng; Thanh Hoa; cultural management

I. INTRODUCTION

Thanh Hoa is one of the culturally distinctive spaces of the North Central region of Vietnam, preserving many valuable forms of intangible cultural heritage, among which folk performances occupy a particularly important position. Unlike ordinary performance activities, folk performances are composite performative forms associated with festivals, beliefs, historical memory, and the communal structure of village life. Within the system of folk performances in Thanh Hoa, Trò Xuân Phả (a traditional folk performance/game in Thanh Hóa) and Trò Chiềng (a traditional folk performance/game in Thanh Hóa) are two representative cases because they both embody the depth of local historical and cultural traditions and demonstrate different modes of heritage adaptation in the contemporary context. If Trò Xuân Phả stands out for its masked dance art, layers of diplomatic meaning, and rich symbolic structure, Trò Chiềng is distinctive for its martial spirit, system of props, performance techniques, and close attachment to the communal festival space [5], [6], [7].

In recent years, safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage have attracted considerable attention from researchers and cultural managers. At a general level, the works of UNESCO, Lê Thị Minh Lý, Bùi Hoài Sơn, and many other scholars have established important arguments concerning living heritage, authenticity, the central role of communities, and the requirement to combine safeguarding with sustainable development [1], [3], [4]. In Thanh Hoa, several studies have described the origins, artistic structure, restoration process, and cultural significance of Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng [5], [6], [7]. However, most studies have remained at the descriptive, documentary, or single-heritage level; comparative approaches situated within a

cultural-management framework and stakeholder relations remain relatively limited. This gap calls for further studies that both identify the intrinsic values of heritage and assess the mechanisms for safeguarding and promotion under present conditions.

Responding to this need, the article pursues three objectives. First, it systematizes the theoretical basis of folk performance heritage values and the principles of safeguarding and promotion in the contemporary context. Second, it compares Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng in order to clarify similarities, differences, and practical management issues. Third, it proposes several groups of solutions applicable to the safeguarding and promotion of folk performance heritage in Thanh Hoa. The contribution of the article lies not only in condensing and restructuring dissertation findings into the format of a scientific journal article, but also in emphasizing the dialectical relationship between safeguarding original values, promoting community roles, and developing local culture on a sustainable basis [8], [10].

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to UNESCO's 2003 Convention, intangible cultural heritage consists of practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills recognized by communities, groups, and individuals as part of their heritage, and constantly recreated in relation to the environment, history, and a sense of identity [1]. This conception lays the foundation for viewing folk performances as "living heritage," meaning that the value of heritage lies not only in the final performance product but also in the entire process of practice, transmission, remembrance, and re-enactment within the community. Therefore, the study of Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng cannot stop at describing items or rituals, but must consider them as cultural ecosystems linked to people, space, beliefs, and village self-governance mechanisms.

In Vietnam, the legal framework on cultural heritage increasingly emphasizes the need to combine safeguarding with promotion. Whereas earlier preservation thinking often leaned toward keeping heritage unchanged, intangible heritage is now approached as an adaptive entity. Safeguarding means preserving the core elements that constitute the heritage's identity, maintaining the environment of practice and the capacity for transmission; promotion means enabling those values to continue living in social life, to be recognized by the public, to be a source of community pride, and to contribute to socio-cultural development without distorting the essence of the heritage [2], [3].

From the perspective of cultural management, folk performance is a composite performative form that brings together many components, such as ritual, music, dance, lyrics, disguise, props, costumes, and the organization of performance space. Therefore, folk performance is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon but also a condensed expression of a community's social structure, religious mentality, and historical memory. In the case of Thanh Hoa, folk performances also clearly reflect overlapping cultural layers between folk and court traditions, between agricultural life and military traditions, and between village space and processes of regional exchange [5]. This composite nature means that identifying the values of Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng must be placed within the broader socio-cultural whole rather than separated from their context of practice.

The concept of "heritage value" in this article is understood in a multidimensional sense. First is historical value, expressed in the capacity to preserve collective memory, worshipped figures, legends, and events meaningful to the locality. Second is cultural-artistic value, expressed through performance structure, symbolic language, singing and dancing techniques, rhythm, masks, props, and folk aesthetics. Third is belief-spiritual value, because the performances are associated with rituals, sacred spaces, and codes of conduct that the community has maintained over time. Fourth is the value of traditional education and community cohesion, because the heritage conveys moral standards, village history, and mechanisms for mobilizing social groups to participate together. Fifth is developmental value, especially its potential contribution to cultural tourism, local education, and the creative industries [3], [4], [8].

An important theoretical issue in the study of intangible heritage is authenticity. Unlike tangible heritage, which can be verified through original material substance, the authenticity of folk performance heritage lies in the degree of fidelity to its core elements in processes of re-enactment and recreation. Change does not always mean a decline in value; on the contrary, living heritage always needs to adapt in order to survive. However, such adaptation must take place within permissible limits: it must not break the symbolic structure, eliminate sacred space, or turn heritage into a purely entertainment performance [9]. Applied to Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng, what is necessary is to distinguish between invariant elements that must be strictly safeguarded and variable elements that can be adjusted in order to broaden public reception.

Along with the theory of authenticity, the stakeholder-role approach is especially significant for heritage management. The State plays the role of institution builder, resource allocator, and policy supervisor; the community is the subject that holds, practices, and transmits heritage; scholars provide professional grounds; businesses and the media help expand reception spaces and generate social resources for value promotion [8], [10]. Without coordination among these actors, heritage can easily fall into two extremes: either becoming over-administrated and wholly dependent on government authorities, or becoming commercialized and driven by the short-term tastes of the cultural market.

In this study, Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng are treated as two typical cases for applying the analytical model above. Trò Xuân Phả stands out for the continuity of its practice, the reach of its symbolism, and its wider recognition. Trò Chiềng is typical of a restoration process based on community memory, documentary records, and the pivotal role of artisans. Comparing the two cases helps clarify the relationship between the intrinsic values of heritage and governance capacity, between safeguarding original cultural space and promoting heritage in the modern context, and between local identity and the locality's requirement for sustainable development [7], [8].

III. VALUES AND THE CURRENT STATE OF SAFEGUARDING AND PROMOTING FOLK PERFORMANCE HERITAGE IN THANH HOA THROUGH A COMPARISON OF TRÒ XUÂN PHẢ AND TRÒ CHIỀNG

3.1. Outstanding Values of the Two Heritages

The comparative results show that both Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng fully embody the core values of folk performance heritage in Thanh Hoa. First is historical value, because both preserve collective memory and reflect cultural sediments associated with village formation, worshipped figures, and folk interpretations of local history. Whereas Trò Xuân Phả is linked to legends of diplomatic relations and masked dance sequences rich in symbolic meaning, Trò Chiềng is associated with military-ritual spirit, showing the connection between folk performance and the community's martial tradition [5], [6], [7].

In addition, both heritages possess very high cultural-artistic value. Trò Xuân Phả is distinctive in its system of dance movements, masks, music, and performance composition; Trò Chiềng stands out in rhythm, props, and the capacity to combine ritual with performance. Survey data from the dissertation show that cultural-artistic value was rated highest by managers in both cases, followed by historical value, community cohesion, and belief-spiritual value. This demonstrates that heritage recognition operates not only at the level of performance but is also tied to a clear awareness of identity and the social role of folk performance [8].

Table 1. Managers' Assessment of the Outstanding Values of the Heritage

Content	Trò Chiềng	Trò Xuân Phả
Historical value	4,40 ± 0,55	4,20 ± 0,61
Cultural-artistic value	4,53 ± 0,50	4,47 ± 0,51
Belief-spiritual value	4,27 ± 0,59	4,13 ± 0,64

Content	Trò Chiềng	Trò Xuân Phả
Traditional educational value	4,13 ± 0,52	4,07 ± 0,58
Community cohesion value	4,33 ± 0,56	4,27 ± 0,57
Tourism development value	3,67 ± 0,72	3,73 ± 0,70

Source: compiled from survey results in the dissertation.

Viewed from the local community, the significance of the two heritages is also clearly affirmed through such criteria as preserving village traditions, expressing local cultural identity, strengthening community ties, and educating younger generations. High average scores on these criteria show that Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng are not merely objects of preservation by management agencies but, first and foremost, constituent elements of the cultural identity of local residents. In other words, the most important foundation for safeguarding heritage lies not in administrative documents but in social recognition and the pride of the heritage-bearing community.

3.2. Current State of Heritage Safeguarding

In recent years, the safeguarding of Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng has achieved a number of noteworthy results. Both heritages have been included in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, thereby providing the locality with a clearer legal basis for preparing dossiers, conducting inventories, supporting artisans, and organizing safeguarding activities. Government authorities at different levels have gradually paid more attention to investing in costumes, props, festival organization, restoration of performance troupes, and reinforcement of practice spaces. Alongside the State, the community continues to play a direct role in practicing and maintaining conventions, especially through core artisans and self-managed village groups [2], [8].

However, survey results show that safeguarding effectiveness remains only fairly good and uneven across different contents. The strongest aspect is inventorying and preparing heritage dossiers, while artisan support and remuneration, preservation of original cultural space, and in-depth documentation remain at an average level. This reflects a common reality: heritage is fairly well recognized in terms of documentation and listing, but the conditions ensuring its sustainable existence—people, space, technical knowledge, and transmission mechanisms—are still not truly secure.

Table 2. Assessment of the Effectiveness of Heritage Safeguarding

Content	Trò Chiềng	Trò Xuân Phả
Inventorying and preparing heritage dossiers	3,80 ± 0,68	3,67 ± 0,75
Implementation of guidelines and policies	3,67 ± 0,62	3,53 ± 0,68
Support and remuneration for artisans	3,07 ± 0,80	3,13 ± 0,83
Preservation of original cultural space	3,33 ± 0,70	3,20 ± 0,82
Heritage documentation work	3,47 ± 0,71	3,33 ± 0,76

Source: compiled from survey results in the dissertation.

These data show that heritage safeguarding cannot be understood merely as periodically organizing festivals or listing heritage on paper. For Trò Chiềng, if the layer of artisans knowledgeable about prop-making techniques is absent, the heritage risks losing its most refined dimension. For Trò Xuân Phả, if performances outside the original space are not well controlled, the sacredness and normativity of its dance system will gradually be eroded. Thus, the focus of safeguarding at present must be to strengthen the capacity of heritage bearers and protect the conditions that constitute the heritage's living environment.

Table 3. Major Difficulties in Heritage Safeguarding

Difficulties	Trò Chiềng (%)	Trò Xuân Phả (%)
Lack of funding	73,3	80,0
Lack of specialized personnel	46,7	53,3
Inadequate mechanisms and policies	26,7	33,3
Lack of coordination among stakeholders	40,0	46,7

Source: compiled from survey results in the dissertation.

Table 3 shows that lack of funding remains the greatest difficulty in both localities; however, even more noteworthy are the shortage of specialized personnel and the insufficiently close coordination among stakeholders. This indicates that the problem of heritage safeguarding lies not only in financial resources but also in governance structure. If funding is increased without improving coordination mechanisms, creating incentives for artisans, and ensuring the support of scholars, safeguarding effectiveness may still remain largely formal.

3.3. Current State of Heritage Value Promotion

Regarding value promotion, Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng are still promoted most effectively within the space of traditional festivals. Festival performances are rated fairly highly, whereas such aspects as linkage with tourism development, transmission to younger generations, and the application of digital technology remain more modest. It can be said that the heritage still “lives” most strongly during the festival season, but has not yet truly become a cultural resource operating regularly in contemporary life [8].

This is a noteworthy paradox. On the one hand, localities all wish to turn heritage into a distinctive cultural product; on the other hand, the conditions necessary for heritage to move sustainably into public space are still incomplete. Communication work has received greater attention, yet heritage digitization and the design of educational and experiential programs for younger generations remain insufficiently deep. As a result, promotion still leans more toward events than toward building a long-term ecosystem of reception.

Table 4. Degree of Heritage Value Promotion

Content	Trò Chiềng	Trò Xuân Phả
Performance in festivals	4,13 ± 0,58	4,00 ± 0,59
Linked to tourism development	3,13 ± 0,82	3,27 ± 0,86
Transmission to younger generations	3,40 ± 0,78	3,27 ± 0,80
Communication and promotion work	3,47 ± 0,73	3,47 ± 0,74
Application of digital technology	2,87 ± 0,85	3,00 ± 0,88

Source: compiled from survey results in the dissertation.

The lowest score belongs to the application of digital technology, revealing a large gap in the way heritage approaches new audiences. For younger generations, awareness of heritage is increasingly associated with multimedia experience. Without digitized documentation, concise introductory products, digital educational content, and in-depth storage platforms, heritage can easily fall into the condition of being “frequently mentioned but difficult to access in a substantive way.” This is especially important for Trò Chiềng, where prop-making techniques and layers of craft knowledge need to be urgently digitized to avoid the risk of disappearance.

Table 5. Outstanding Risks in the Process of Promoting Heritage Values

Risks	Trò Chiềng (%)	Trò Xuân Phả (%)
Erosion of the artisan workforce	60,0	66,7
Stage adaptation distorting the heritage	40,0	53,3
Excessive commercialization	33,3	40,0
Decline in sacred and belief dimensions	26,7	33,3

Source: compiled from survey results in the dissertation.

The data in Table 5 show that Trò Xuân Phả faces higher risks of stage adaptation and commercialization than Trò Chiềng. This is consistent with the reality that this heritage has moved beyond village space more often and has participated more in promotional activities. By contrast, Trò Chiềng is under less pressure from stage adaptation but faces risks of interrupted production techniques, dependence on a small number of elderly artisans, and difficulties in expanding its public reception space. Thus, each heritage requires its own promotion strategy rather than both being placed within one uniform exploitation model.

3.4. Community Role and the Degree of Coordination among Stakeholders

One meaningful finding of the dissertation is that the community foundation of the two heritages remains fairly strong. The proportion of local people who reported that they “know very clearly” or “know” the heritage in both localities accounts for the majority, showing that Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng have not become unfamiliar practices to local residents. In addition, criteria such as preserving village traditions, expressing local cultural identity, and strengthening community cohesion were all rated highly by the community [8].

However, when considering the degree of participation in the management process, the community mainly participates at the levels of information reception and co-implementation; the degrees of co-monitoring and co-decision-making remain more modest than what the community itself desires. From this, one can also see a gap between “participation” and “empowerment.” Heritage only truly has long-term vitality when the community is not merely the performer, but also a co-governing subject in matters related to restoration, organization, resource allocation, and the orientation of value promotion.

Table 6. Degree of Local Community Understanding of the Heritage

Level of understanding	Trò Chiềng (%)	Trò Xuân Phả (%)
Know very clearly	46,0	31,0
Know	38,0	50,0
Know a little	12,0	14,0
Do not know clearly	4,0	5,0

Source: compiled from survey results in the dissertation.

At a broader level, evaluations of stakeholder roles show that state management agencies and local communities are regarded as the two most important actors, while scholars and businesses remain less visible. This structure indicates that the current model of heritage safeguarding still leans toward the State–community axis. This is a necessary foundation, but not sufficient to create capacity for sustainable value promotion. Without scholars, heritage can lack academic standards in restoration and digitization; without businesses, heritage finds it difficult to develop into a cultural product capable of generating resources for the community [8], [10].

From the comparison of the two cases, three observations can be drawn. First, both Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng possess very high value systems and are strongly recognized by their communities. Second, safeguarding and promotion have achieved positive results but still lack depth in such aspects as artisan remuneration, educational transmission, documentation, and connection with the cultural market. Third, the

greatest challenge at present is not only the lack of funding but also the absence of an effective heritage governance model in which community rights, expert knowledge, and market capacity are harmoniously integrated.

IV. ORIENTATIONS AND GROUPS OF SOLUTIONS FOR SAFEGUARDING AND PROMOTING THE VALUES OF FOLK PERFORMANCE HERITAGE IN THANH HOA

4.1. Improving Institutions and Strengthening Resources

First, it is necessary to continue improving the management framework in the direction of clear but flexible decentralization, capable of reflecting the specific characteristics of each heritage. Although Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng both belong to the group of folk performances, they differ in performance structure, practice space, degree of diffusion, and conservation risks. Therefore, each heritage needs its own safeguarding plan, clearly identifying the elements that must be strictly protected, the contents that may be adjusted in the promotion process, and the mechanism of professional appraisal for any major intervention related to restoration, repair, editing, or performance outside the original space.

Second, the financial investment mechanism needs to be renewed by shifting from case-based support to the commissioning of public cultural services. Artisans, performance troupes, and heritage practice clubs need to be regarded as providers of cultural services linked to community interests. When contracted with responsibility for transmission activities, model performances, documentation, or heritage education in schools, they will have greater motivation to maintain regular practice rather than participating intermittently only during the festival season.

Third, the mobilization of social resources should be promoted, but within a transparent framework subject to community oversight. Establishing heritage conservation funds in key localities is a feasible direction. Such funds should be supplemented by state support, social contributions, and income from cultural-tourism activities, while also requiring a public allocation mechanism for reinvestment in artisans, performance troupes, cultural spaces, and transmission activities.

4.2. Strengthening Transmission and Developing Heritage Human Resources

First, transmission should be organized according to a “dual” model combining static conservation with dynamic conservation. At the core level, it is necessary to maintain a team of key artisans who hold performance techniques, music, props, and ritual conventions. At the expanded level, satellite clubs, youth practice groups, and community experience activities should be formed in order to increase access opportunities for younger generations. This approach both preserves the original code of the heritage and creates conditions for the heritage to continue living in a rapidly changing social context.

Second, heritage education should be incorporated into local education programs in a more substantive way. Teaching about Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng should not stop at illustrative performances, but should help students understand the context of formation, symbolic structure, community meaning, and historical value of the heritage. When heritage is properly “pedagogized,” reception shifts from formal fascination to respect for cultural depth.

Third, appropriate remuneration policies should be developed for artisans and those who hold specialized skills. In Trò Chiềng, not only performing artisans but also those who craft fireworks, bamboo elephants, and bamboo horses should be recognized as heritage bearers. If only performers are honored while technical labor is neglected, the heritage will gradually lose its most refined part.

4.3. Strengthening Documentation and Controlling Authenticity

First, a set of normative criteria should be developed for each heritage as the basis for controlling authenticity. For Trò Xuân Phả, the criteria must clearly identify elements that must not be changed, such as the structure of dance movements, basic rhythms, the mask system, and ritual sequence. For Trò Chiềng, the criteria

need to cover the process of prop making, traditional materials, performance composition, and ritual logic. Clearly determining which elements are invariant and which are variable will help resolve the contradiction between safeguarding and adaptation.

Second, it is necessary to move decisively from descriptive recording toward technical documentation and in-depth digitization. Multi-angle video recordings, musical notation, movement descriptions, and data on materials, dimensions, and prop-making techniques need to be systematically developed. For Trò Chiềng, this is an urgent requirement because the layer of craft knowledge associated with props depends on a very small number of elderly artisans. For Trò Xuân Phả, in-depth digitization will help standardize transmission and limit distortions when the heritage is performed outside its original space.

Third, all restoration, editing, and stage adaptation activities require scholarly appraisal. The participation of core artisans and experts is necessary not only to ensure accuracy but also to define the boundary between creative adaptation and heritage distortion. Only when value promotion is based on academic standards can heritage expand its audience without losing its identity.

4.4. Promoting Heritage Values in Connection with Sustainable Tourism and Community-Based Governance

First, the values of the two heritages should be promoted through regional linkage chains rather than through the isolated exploitation of individual sites. Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng should be connected with clusters of relics, festivals, and cultural tourism routes in Thanh Hoa such as Lam Kinh, the Ho Citadel, Đờng Cổ Temple, or traditional village cultural spaces. When placed within a broader destination ecosystem, heritage will have more opportunities to access stable visitor flows, thereby increasing opportunities for performance, communication, and the return of resources to the community.

Second, a distinct brand should be built for each heritage on the basis of its differentiated identity. Trò Xuân Phả can be positioned as a highly symbolic masked dance heritage; Trò Chiềng can be positioned as a performance space associated with martial spirit and the art of folk props. Clear positioning will help avoid the situation in which heritage is merged indistinctly into the “common basket” of local festivals.

Third, a fair benefit-sharing mechanism needs to be established among the actors participating in heritage exploitation. Income from performances, experience activities, communication, or auxiliary services must have a clear allocation ratio for conservation funds, artisans, performance troupes, and the maintenance of cultural space. Only when the community receives real benefits will it have long-term motivation to preserve the authenticity of the heritage.

Fourth, there needs to be a strong shift toward a community-based heritage governance model. This does not merely mean mobilizing local people to participate in organization, but more deeply granting them co-decision-making power in core issues related to restoration, resource use, and orientations for value promotion. When the community becomes a genuine governing subject, heritage will have a sufficiently strong social foundation to resist both excessive bureaucratization and extreme commercialization.

V. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng shows that folk performance heritage in Thanh Hoa is a repository of values exceptionally rich in historical, artistic, and social depth. Although the two heritages differ in expressive structure and trajectories of movement, both reflect the nature of intangible heritage as a living entity attached to the bearer community. Their value lies not only in dance movements, props, or rituals, but also in their capacity to preserve collective memory, build local identity, educate tradition, and reinforce social cohesion.

The analysis also shows that the safeguarding and promotion of the two heritages have achieved several positive results in recent years, especially in listing, dossier preparation, restoration of festival practice, and the raising of social awareness. However, such issues as lack of financial resources, inadequate remuneration for artisans, limited documentation, unsystematic transmission, and uneven coordination among stakeholders remain significant bottlenecks. This demonstrates that heritage safeguarding cannot stop at preserving external forms, but must focus on the conditions that create the heritage's long-term vitality.

From the comparison of the two cases, the article affirms the need to move from an incident-based conservation mindset to an in-depth heritage governance model in which the community is central, the State plays a facilitating role, the professional world provides scientific grounds, and the cultural market is guided by the principle of sustainable development. Only when these four pillars are effectively connected can Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng both safeguard their original values and expand their presence in contemporary life.

It can be said that the greatest significance of safeguarding and promoting folk performance heritage in Thanh Hoa lies not only in preserving a part of the past but also in creating endogenous cultural resources for the present and the future. In the context of globalization and digital transformation, heritage is truly sustainable only when its values are correctly identified, communities are empowered, and promotion is carried out on the basis of respect for authenticity. This is also the necessary approach for Trò Xuân Phả and Trò Chiềng to continue living as representative cultural symbols of Thanh Hoa in the new era.

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