

Bridging Heritage and Tourism through Interdisciplinary Theories: A Case Study of Traditional Performing Arts in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 16-Jun-25

REVISED: 11-Aug-25

ACCEPTED: 26-Aug-25

PUBLISHED: 15-Nov-25

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Citation: Hoang Son Giang, Phan Thi Hong Xuan and Lam Nhan (2025). Bridging Heritage and Tourism through Interdisciplinary Theories: A Case Study of Traditional Performing Arts in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Horizon J. Hum. Soc. Sci. Res. 7 (2), 227–237. <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2025.v7.n2.id1312.p227>



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Southern Vietnam's traditional performing arts, particularly Đờn ca tài tử and Cải lương, are deeply rooted in the region's cultural identity and represent valuable resources for enhancing tourism in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)¹. Despite their cultural richness, the integration of these art forms into the city's tourism strategies remains limited and insufficiently theorized within interdisciplinary frameworks. **Methods:** This study employs an in-depth qualitative research approach, combining document analysis, participant observation, and conducting 20 in-depth interviews. The analysis is guided by an interdisciplinary framework integrating stakeholder theory, cultural ecology theory, cultural economics theory, and sustainable tourism theory to examine how traditional performing arts can be effectively leveraged in tourism development while preserving their cultural integrity. **Results:** The findings indicate that sustainable tourism development involving traditional performing arts requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, including cultural practitioners, tourism authorities, policymakers, and local communities. The study identifies gaps in current policies, infrastructural limitations, and low public engagement. Furthermore, it highlights the ongoing tensions between cultural preservation and commercialization in the tourism sector. **Discussion and Conclusions:** The study underscores the critical role of interdisciplinary strategies and stakeholder engagement in balancing heritage conservation with tourism development. It concludes with policy recommendations and practical solutions for integrating Đờn ca tài tử and Cải lương into HCMC's urban tourism landscape. These proposals aim to foster a culturally rooted and resilient tourism model by enhancing the tourist experience through strategic stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: Traditional art, Cultural tourism, Heritage culture, Urban tourism, Heritage preservation, Vietnam's intangible culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The integration of intangible cultural heritage into tourism development has become an important

trend, aiming to create unique visitor experiences and contribute to heritage preservation. According to UNESCO (2015), living forms of heritage, such as performing arts,

¹It should be noted that as of July 1, 2025, the administrative boundaries of Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces have been officially adjusted following national restructuring. This study uses data and context prior to this change.

can generate economic benefits and enhance community pride when properly managed. However, excessive commercialization may distort the inherent value of heritage. This raises the urgent need to develop tourism in a sustainable manner that is closely linked with heritage, especially for traditional art forms that are gradually losing their audience in modern society.

In Vietnam, *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* are two representative performing art forms of the Southern region. *Đờn ca tài tử* was recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013, while *Cải lương* was once a dominant form of popular theater throughout the twentieth century. Nevertheless, facing increasing competition from modern entertainment, both are now at risk of fading. This trend is strongly reflected in Vietnam's national policies. The foundation was laid by Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW (2014) of the Party Central Committee, which defined culture not only as a spiritual foundation but also as a driving force for sustainable development. This perspective was further concretized in the "Strategy for the Development of Vietnam's Cultural Industries to 2020, with a Vision to 2030" (Decision 1755/QĐ-TTg, 2016), which identified performing arts and cultural tourism as key sectors. More recently, the commitment to cultural development has been reinforced through Conclusion No. 156-KL/TW (2025) on continuing the implementation of Resolution 33, and the approval of the "National Target Program for Cultural Development for the 2025-2035 period" (Resolution 162/2024/QH15), demonstrating a consistent and long-term strategic vision from the state. This poses a dual challenge, requiring not only the preservation of these arts but also their renewal in order to remain relevant in contemporary life. As the country's major center of culture and tourism, HCMC has made efforts to integrate traditional arts into tourism

activities. These include *Đờn ca tài tử* performances at the Ao Dai Museum and Binh Quoi Tourist Village, as well as *Cải lương* shows for tourists at Tran Huu Trang Theater. However, these efforts remain fragmented, lacking a comprehensive strategy and strong collaboration among stakeholders.

Despite these efforts and policy orientations, a clear research gap exists regarding a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis of the structural challenges and opportunities in this domain. Therefore, this study addresses the central research question: How can *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* be effectively integrated into tourism development in HCMC, while also ensuring the sustainable preservation of their cultural values? To address this, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach and applies four theoretical frameworks: (1) Stakeholder theory, (2) Cultural ecology theory, (3) Cultural economics theory, and (4) Sustainable tourism theory. These frameworks are used to analyze the current situation and propose feasible solutions for harmonizing tourism development with the preservation of traditional performing arts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The selection of these four theories was deliberate, aiming to construct a multi-layered analytical framework capable of capturing the complexity of the research problem. Stakeholder theory provides the lens to identify the key actors and analyze their interactions, conflicts, and potential for collaboration. Cultural ecology theory allows for an examination of the "environment" in which the arts exist, including the social, spatial, and policy conditions that influence their adaptation and survival. Cultural economics theory offers critical tools to decode the value system, particularly the inherent tension between cultural integrity and commercial pressures. Finally, sustainable

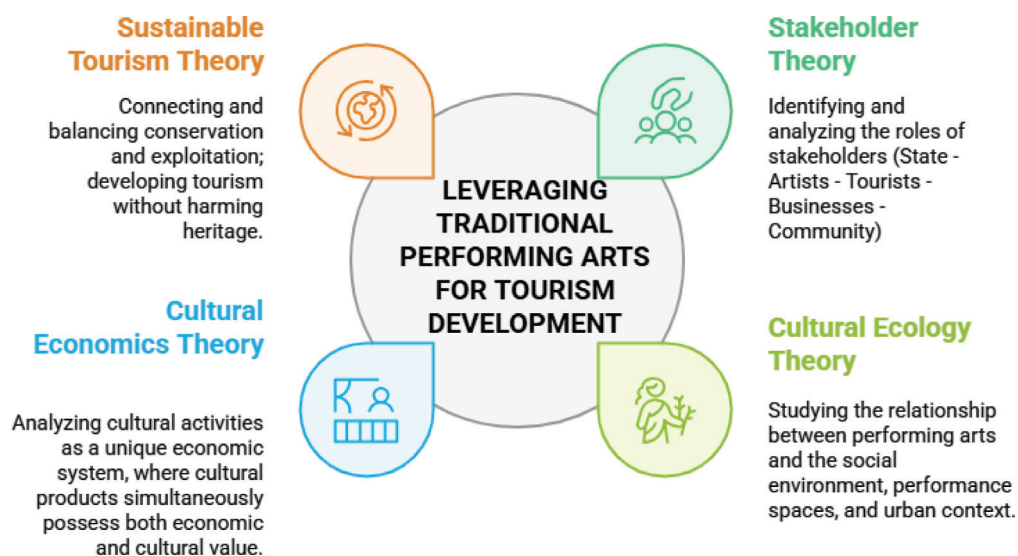


Figure 1. The integrated theoretical framework for the study

tourism theory serves as the normative framework, providing the guiding principles and ultimate goals for developing solutions that are balanced, ethical, and long-term.

2.1. Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory is one of the foundational frameworks in modern strategic management. It was first systematically conceptualized by R. Edward Freeman in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (1984). According to Freeman, businesses or organizations should not focus solely on the interests of shareholders, as in classical theories. Instead, they should broaden their perspective to consider other actors who affect or are affected by the organization's activities. These are referred to as stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders encompass a wide range of groups who are involved in or impacted by development processes. In the context of cultural tourism, they may include government agencies, local communities, artisans and artists, travel businesses, tourists, and international organizations. From this perspective, the preservation and promotion of traditional arts in connection with tourism requires the participation and collaboration of all stakeholders in order to achieve shared goals in a balanced and coordinated manner. Applying stakeholder theory to heritage tourism management helps clarify the roles and expectations of each group. It also supports the establishment of effective mechanisms for coordination, dialogue, and benefit-sharing. Previous research has shown that multi-stakeholder collaboration is key to reconciling the relationship between heritage conservation and sustainable tourism development.

2.2. Cultural Ecology Theory

Cultural ecology theory is an interdisciplinary approach rooted in the work of American cultural anthropologist Julian Steward, particularly in his influential book *Theory of Culture Change* (1955), which argued that cultural patterns are products of societal adaptation to specific environments. In other words, each cultural form can only survive when supported by a suitable cultural ecosystem, which includes spatial, community, economic, educational, and policy conditions. If this ecosystem is disrupted or degraded, cultural heritage may not be able to survive.

Applying this theory, the preservation of traditional performing arts must be closely associated with the maintenance of the socio-cultural environment in which these art forms are nurtured. This includes not only the protection of the natural environment, but also favorable

economic and social conditions, educational systems, supportive policies, and a strong sense of community identity. Thus, the cultural ecology approach emphasizes the importance of creating an enabling environment where traditional arts can continue to "live" and adapt to new contexts, rather than being disconnected from their cultural origins.

2.3. Cultural Economics Theory

Cultural Economics Theory, a field that applies economic principles to the arts, is built upon foundational works such as David Throsby's (2001) *Economics and Culture* and Baumol and Bowen's (1966) seminal study, *Performing Arts-The Economic Dilemma*. This theory does not reduce culture to financial figures but instead seeks to explain the unique economic behaviors and structures that operate within this field, where products carry profound symbolic and aesthetic values alongside their exchange value. Its central thesis is the theory of "duality of value," pioneered by David Throsby (2001), which posits that all cultural goods simultaneously possess economic value (measurable in monetary terms) and cultural value (a non-material, multidimensional set of attributes including aesthetic, social, historical, and symbolic value). This parallel existence creates an internal conflict, as efforts to maximize economic value can risk diminishing cultural value, posing a core challenge for cultural management to regulate this complex relationship.

Another foundational contribution is the "cost disease" model by Baumol and Bowen (1966), which demonstrates that labor productivity in the performing arts grows much more slowly than in other industries. However, to retain artists, arts organizations must pay competitive wages that keep pace with the broader economy, creating a chronic "income-expenditure gap". This explains the inherent financial difficulties faced by traditional arts and the need for external support. From this, cultural economics provides a strong rationale for public policy intervention. Bruno Frey (2003) argues that the value of a cultural asset also extends to the wider community through "non-user values" (such as existence, option, and bequest values) that the free market cannot price, leading to a classic market failure. Therefore, state support is both necessary and economically justified to ensure that the total social value of culture is maintained and developed.

2.4. Sustainable Tourism Theory

Sustainable tourism theory emerged from the broader concept of sustainable development, famously defined in the Brundtland Report, titled *Our Common*

Future (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). When applied to cultural tourism, sustainable tourism refers to the development of tourism that balances three core objectives: economic effectiveness, environmental and resource protection, and the promotion of local cultural and social values. These aims ensure long-term benefits for both the community and tourists.

Sustainable tourism theory emphasizes the importance of responsible planning and management in tourism. It warns against short-term profit-driven approaches that may lead to irreversible negative impacts on the natural environment and local cultural identity (UNESCO, 2015). In the context of traditional performing arts, sustainable tourism requires that tourism activities be carefully designed and monitored. This ensures they provide resources to support heritage maintenance, such as funding, the training of younger generations, and raising public awareness, while avoiding excessive commercialization or distortion of the art's original character. Active participation of local communities in the development of cultural tourism products is also a fundamental principle. This involvement helps ensure that communities receive fair benefits and maintain ownership and control over their cultural heritage.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs an in-depth qualitative research approach to provide a multi-dimensional and contextual understanding of the research problem. This approach was chosen for its ability to explore the complex perspectives of key stakeholders and interpret the nuanced realities of

cultural phenomena that quantitative data alone cannot capture. The specific methods included:

- **Document Analysis:** The study involved the systematic collection and analysis of policy documents, strategies, and plans from central government agencies and HCMC City authorities; summary reports from the Department of Culture and Sports, the Department of Tourism, and public arts units; and related scientific research and articles. This method helped establish the policy and institutional context, providing a framework for comparison with primary data from interviews and observations.
- **In-depth Interviews:** This was the primary method for gathering rich, firsthand data. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of key stakeholders. Specifically, the 20 interviewees included 4 state managers, 8 artists and artisans, 4 private entrepreneurs, and 4 researchers and experts. The interviews focused on clarifying operational models, identifying internal challenges, and capturing the perspectives of “insiders” that secondary data could not reveal. The selection criteria for these interviewees and the key themes explored are summarized in Table 1.
- **Participant Observation:** Leveraging the author's professional role as an MC for several traditional arts programs in the city, this method was used to record the authentic atmosphere of performances, the immediate reactions of tourists, organizational practices, and the interactions between artists and audiences. This provided candid, objective data on

Table 1. Profile of interviewees and key interview themes.

Stakeholder Group	Profile and Selection Criteria	Key Themes Explored
State Managers	Leadership from public arts units (theatres, cultural centres) and the Department of Culture and Sports, and the Department of Tourism. Selected for their policy-making and implementation roles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy and institutional challenges. Inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms (culture-tourism). Strategies for heritage preservation and promotion.
Artists & Artisans	People's Artists, Meritorious Artists, veteran and emerging performers of <i>Đờn ca tài tử</i> and <i>Cải lương</i> (both state-employed and independent). Selected for their deep artistic knowledge and first-hand performance experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic challenges and artists' livelihoods. Conflict between artistic integrity and commercial pressures. The “lived experience” of performing for tourists. Issues of succession and training for the next generation
Private Entrepreneurs	Owners and senior management of tourism businesses that feature traditional arts (theatres, restaurants, cruise ships). Selected for their market-driven perspectives and understanding of tourist needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business models for cultural tourism products. Tourist preferences and market demand. Challenges in collaborating with artists and state agencies. Marketing and pricing strategies.
Researchers & Experts	Leading researchers and experts in cultural and tourism studies from reputable universities. Selected for their theoretical and analytical insights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historical context and evolution of the art forms. Assessment and comparison of development models. Strategic recommendations and future trends.

Source: Authors, 2025.

the actual experience at the performance sites, complementing the data from interviews.

The data collected from these methods were thematically analyzed, cross-referenced, and interpreted through the lens of the study's four theoretical frameworks to ensure the credibility and depth of the findings.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Perspective from Stakeholder Theory

From the perspective of stakeholder theory, integrating *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* into tourism development in HCMC requires the collaboration of multiple actors. These include local government authorities, particularly the Department of Culture and Sports and the Department of Tourism, the community of artisans and artists, performing arts institutions (such as theaters and *Cải lương* troupes), tourism businesses (such as travel agencies, attractions, restaurants, and hotels), local residents, and tourists. Currently, there is a notable lack of an effective coordination mechanism among these parties. Although the HCMC People's Committee approved a project in 2018 to preserve and promote *Đờn ca tài tử*, which included an orientation toward tourism, the results after several years remain limited. According to Pham Thai Binh (HCMC Cultural Center), "in order to develop *Đờn ca tài tử*, we need an investor, a clear plan, and resource mobilization. But at the moment, everything remains a hope, and there are not many signs to be optimistic" (Trung Son, 2022). This reflects the insufficient role of the government in leading and uniting the relevant stakeholders.

In terms of artistic human resources, HCMC has a strong foundation. In an interview with the research team, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hoai Phuong, Deputy Director of the HCMC Cultural Center, confirmed that the city is not lacking in practitioners. Statistics from her center in 2024 recorded 229 clubs and 84 groups of *Đờn ca tài tử* with 1,226 active members, a force she described as a "solid rear for the entire grassroots cultural system." This represents a core foundation, although most members are semi-professionals. The challenge is how to bring together those artisans and performers who are both capable and committed to participating in tourism programs over the long term. Many currently view *Đờn ca* as a refined pastime rather than a viable profession, as it provides little financial return. For instance, at the Ao Dai Museum, many performers must pursue other jobs for a living and can only perform in the evenings or during free time. This makes it difficult to sustain their engagement without adequate financial support.

Therefore, encouraging greater participation from the artistic community requires appropriate incentives and fair benefit-sharing mechanisms. For example, cultural tourism programs should allocate a portion of their revenue to pay performers fairly or offer subsidies for *tài tử* clubs to maintain regular operations.

In the broader picture, tourism businesses and performance organizers are also key stakeholders. However, most tour operators are not currently interested in incorporating *Đờn ca tài tử* or *Cải lương* performances into their tours due to concerns about limited tourist interest. Some attractions that once hosted regular *tài tử* performances have discontinued them due to low audience turnout. The root cause lies in the lack of high-quality content and ineffective marketing, resulting in a mismatch between supply and demand. This creates a cycle: businesses hesitate to invest for fear of financial loss, while the public remains unaware, leading to poor attendance and failed models. To break this cycle, stakeholders must come together to design more attractive cultural tourism products and implement effective communication strategies to draw in visitors. The coordinating role of the local government is crucial. The city could act as a facilitator to connect travel companies with performing arts institutions, such as the Tran Huu Trang Theater, and provide initial financial support or incentive policies. Establishing a multi-stakeholder cooperation network would help distribute both risks and benefits. Tourism enterprises would bring in customers, performing arts institutions would ensure performance quality, local communities would offer cultural settings and complementary services such as cuisine and souvenirs, and government agencies would support infrastructure and promotional efforts. This public-private-community partnership model has been successfully implemented in heritage tourism destinations around the world. It presents a promising approach to developing unique tourism products while ensuring that all parties benefit and remain committed to heritage preservation.

However, in-depth interviews reveal a significant imbalance in this stakeholder ecosystem. While businesses and organizers hold economic power, the artists—the core stakeholders who embody the cultural capital—are often in a vulnerable position. As People's Artist Thanh Tuyet shared, the flexibility of the art form can be a double-edged sword: "*The best thing about Đờn ca tài tử is its flexibility... But precisely because of that flexibility, people treat us like a 'spice,' a 'side dish,' not the main course. We become 'background music' for a fancy dinner or a river cruise... the restaurant owner sells a meal for 500,000 VND, the cruise owner sells a tour ticket for a million, but we artists... receive a few hundred thousand*

in remuneration.” This testimony highlights a critical issue of benefit-sharing that threatens the long-term sustainability of the artists’ engagement.

4.2. Perspective from Cultural Ecology Theory

The cultural ecology approach allows for a deeper assessment of the environmental conditions necessary for the survival and development of *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* within the context of urban tourism. As Andrew P. Vayda has noted, cultural transformation should be understood as a continuous process of adaptation by social groups to new environmental conditions (Ngô Thị Phương Lan, 2016). First, in terms of cultural space, *Đờn ca tài tử* is traditionally a chamber music style closely associated with peaceful rural landscapes and riverine environments. When relocated to noisy urban tourism settings, this art form may feel out of place if the context is not carefully curated. In practice, some *Đờn ca tài tử* performances held on tourist boats or at floating markets have not succeeded, largely because of engine noise and the surrounding commotion that detracted from the audience’s enjoyment. Therefore, it is essential to select appropriate performance spaces, ideally quiet and open areas that reflect the original cultural setting. In HCMC, suburban districts such as Cu Chi, Binh Chanh, and Can Gio could take advantage of their riverside and garden landscapes to host programs like “Đờn ca tài tử under the moonlight” or “Đờn ca tài tử by the water,” integrated with rural tourism. At the same time, it is crucial to create a distinct urban identity for *Đờn ca tài tử* in Ho Chi Minh City, rather than merely replicating the rural aesthetic. As researcher Dr. Le Hong Phuoc emphasized in an interview: “Đờn ca tài tử in Saigon must have an urban space... If you come to Saigon and also ‘mimic’ the Mekong Delta style, firstly it’s not true to the historical reality of Saigon’s *Đờn ca tài tử*, and secondly, tourists will find nothing new. We must show people how *Đờn ca tài tử* exists in an urban setting.” This perspective suggests that the potential lies not only in copying the garden model but in leveraging the historical presence of the art form within the city’s own urban spaces, from the salons of intellectuals in the past to the modern-day clubs in cafes and cultural houses. These periodic “cultural spaces” would allow *Đờn ca tài tử* to become a natural part of urban life and help foster an appreciative local audience.

Social and community factors are also key components of the cultural ecosystem. *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* can only survive in the long term if they are respected by the community and inherited by younger generations. Currently, there is a real risk of generational disconnect. Many elder artisans are aging, while few young people are eager to carry on the tradition. Most *tài*

tử activities now take place within informal hobby clubs and lack youth participation. To address this, traditional music should be integrated into school curricula and extracurricular programs, giving students early exposure to *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương*. HCMC has organized performances for students in recent years, but these efforts need to be maintained on a regular basis. In parallel, recognizing and honoring artisans with formal titles such as People’s Artist or Meritorious Artist is an important way to acknowledge their contributions and encourage them to continue mentoring others. From an economic perspective, as previously mentioned, there is a need to build a cultural ecosystem in which artists can earn a sustainable livelihood. If traditional performers are unable to make a living, they will be forced to abandon their craft, and the heritage may be lost. This challenge requires, on one hand, stronger integration with tourism to create markets and revenue streams. On the other hand, initial state support is essential. For example, the city could subsidize performances in the early stages of building a tourism brand or commission high-quality shows for official events, thus creating more employment opportunities for artists. In fact, HCMC has organized several regular festivals, such as the “Golden Lotus” *Đờn ca tài tử* Festival and the Citywide *Cải lương* Festival. These events not only aim to discover new talent but also provide performance opportunities that help sustain traditional arts in contemporary life. This represents a cultural ecology approach that establishes a continuous cycle of training, performing, recognition, and community engagement, ensuring that traditional art forms remain “nurtured” within a favorable environment.

The challenges within the cultural ecosystem are particularly acute for public institutions. Mr. Phan Quoc Kiet, Director of the Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theater, candidly described the theater’s struggle to adapt to the new economic environment: “The harsh reality is that for many performances, we only sell a few dozen tickets, sometimes even fewer than 10. The audience for these shows are mostly relatives of the artists, theater staff, or invited guests.” This situation is a direct consequence of an operational model that, according to him, has a “DNA” built to fulfill state-assigned service quotas rather than to compete in the market. This reveals a systemic paradox where the very institutions tasked with preserving high art are the least equipped to make it economically viable in the modern tourism ecosystem.

4.3. Perspective from Cultural Economics Theory

From the lens of cultural economics, the challenges that *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* face in Ho Chi Minh City’s tourism sector are not merely issues of public taste

or marketing, but are rooted in structural value conflicts and economic pressures. Applying this theory allows for a deeper diagnosis of these problems and helps in proposing more sustainable business models.

First, the process of integrating traditional arts into tourism products in the city has clearly exposed the conflict of “duality of value”. *Đờn ca tài tử* performances on Saigon River cruises or in restaurants are prime examples. These models maximize *economic value* by creating a convenient product that is easily integrated into tour schedules and does not demand high concentration from tourists. However, they severely diminish *cultural value*: authenticity and the original performance context are compromised by noisy environments, while artistic value is diluted as classic repertoires are shortened to fit brief time slots. The management challenge here is not to prevent commercialization, but to design models capable of generating revenue without eroding the core “cultural capital” of the heritage.

Second, the “cost disease” model by Baumol and Bowen provides a sharp diagnostic tool for the chronic difficulties of the *Cải lương* stage in HCMC. The reality of troupes struggling to maintain operations and artists facing precarious livelihoods is not just due to “audiences turning away.” It is also a consequence of an economic law: the productivity of a stage performance cannot increase (it still requires a similar cast, musicians, and duration as it did 50 years ago), while production costs (theater rental, artist salaries, set design) in an expensive metropolis like HCMC continuously escalate. This creates an “income-expenditure gap” that ticket prices can hardly cover, especially when competing with countless modern entertainment forms that have much lower marginal costs. This theory suggests that without specific funding mechanisms designed with an understanding of this “disease”, efforts to “revitalize” the art form are unlikely to achieve sustainable success.

Based on this diagnosis, cultural economics also suggests feasible solutions and business models. One direction is the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model, where the state can support fixed costs (providing venues in public theaters, subsidizing basic salaries for artists) to address the “cost disease,” while tourism enterprises focus on their strengths in product development and marketing. Another model is to develop the experience economy; instead of just selling performance tickets, a series of products can be created, such as backstage tours, meet-and-greets with artists, or short workshops to learn a line of *vọng cổ* (a style of singing in *Cải lương*). This approach not only increases revenue but also deepens the cultural experience for tourists, generating economic value from ancillary activities while preserving the integrity of the main performance. Finally, the foundation

for any sustainable business model is the effective enforcement of intellectual property rights, ensuring legitimate benefits for artists and creators, thereby encouraging long-term investment and innovation.

4.4 Perspectives from sustainable tourism theory

From the perspective of sustainable tourism, the exploitation of *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* must fulfill two parallel objectives. These are to generate momentum for tourism and local economic development, and to ensure that the cultural heritage and the communities who own it are not harmed. Lessons from several locations show that heritage can be easily damaged when development is driven by short-term profit. For example, after *Đờn ca tài tử* was inscribed by UNESCO, performances rapidly proliferated across many tourist destinations in the Mekong Delta. However, due to a lack of proper orientation, a distorted form of commercialization occurred. Performances advertised as *Đờn ca tài tử* catered to tourists’ demands for pop music or contemporary tunes, undermining the refined aesthetic that defines the genre (Nham Hung, 2023). As a result, audiences quickly lost interest, venues shut down due to lack of visitors, and many artisans found themselves out of work. This is a clear case of an unsustainable approach.

Conversely, a sustainable approach requires long-term vision. Rather than staging hasty, low-quality performances to earn immediate profits, efforts should be made to invest in the development of truly high-quality cultural tourism products. These may not bring instant returns but can build credibility and long-term value. Above all, cultural identity and authenticity must be respected in tourism offerings. As UNESCO recommends, tourism activities must prioritize the interests and aspirations of the communities who hold the heritage. These communities should be empowered to decide how their culture is presented and shared (UNESCO, 2015). Therefore, when designing tourism programs related to *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương*, consultation with veteran artisans is crucial to ensure that core traditional values are preserved. For instance, musical compositions can be shortened for tourist consumption but should not be excessively altered in melody. Performances can be creatively staged but should not be transformed into vulgar comedy. The participation of local communities is also essential. People in the Southern region are the true custodians of this heritage, so they should receive fair benefits through employment or income generated from tourism. Their voices should also be included in the management process.

A community-based tourism model can be applied. For example, households in Can Gio or Nha Be can organize *Đờn ca tài tử* nights in their gardens or homestays. Tourists can experience local culture while hosts earn income and

have greater motivation to preserve traditions. This model requires training communities in tourism-related skills and partnering with travel companies to bring visitors to these experiences. Another important dimension of sustainable tourism is education and awareness-raising for tourists. Many international visitors and even local youth may not fully understand the value of *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương*, resulting in indifference or a view of these performances as mere entertainment services. Therefore, in addition to explanations provided during programs, promotional materials should emphasize the historical and artistic significance of these art forms to help tourists appreciate them more deeply. The tourism sector could also develop codes of conduct for attending traditional performances, guiding visitors to respect artists, avoid making noise, and behave appropriately during shows.

Lastly, economic efficiency must be thoughtfully balanced with heritage conservation. A cultural tourism program can only be sustainable if it generates enough income to support those who deliver it. Otherwise, they will lack the motivation to continue. This means that revenue strategies should not be overlooked. A sound financial model for *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* tourism products should include diverse sources of funding, such as ticket sales, corporate sponsorships, government subsidies, and conservation funds. Additional income can also come from merchandising, such as selling CDs, DVDs, or photo books of the performances, and from offering experiential workshops like introductory singing or instrument lessons.

It is crucial that a portion of the profits be reinvested into preservation efforts. These may include supporting the training of young talent, restoring traditional instruments and costumes, and organizing competitions to select and mentor the next generation. Only through such a cyclical model can tourism generate resources for heritage conservation, while conservation, in turn, enriches tourism offerings in a sustainable way. In summary, a sustainable tourism approach demands a careful balance between development and preservation. For *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương*, this means continuously improving tourism products to attract audiences, ensuring that the art form remains viable, while also preserving its cultural essence and resisting the pressures of commercialization. This is a complex challenge but also an essential path if the heritage is to remain alive within the community for generations to come.

4.5. Comparative Insights: Successful Models from Other Vietnamese Cities

To provide a practical context for potential solutions, it is valuable to examine successful models of integrating traditional arts into tourism from other Vietnamese cities.

Hoi An's Integrated Cultural Space Model: The ancient town of Hoi An has successfully transformed its heritage into a core tourism product. The Hoi An Traditional Art Performance House, located in the heart of the old town, offers multiple daily shows featuring folk songs, dances, and *Bài chòi* (a UNESCO-recognized art form). Crucially, the performance is included as an option in the mandatory entrance ticket to the old town, ensuring a steady stream of audience members. The theater itself is housed in a historic building, creating an authentic atmosphere, and often includes interactive elements like mask painting workshops. This model demonstrates a successful public-private partnership where cultural policy is directly linked to the tourism economy, creating a sustainable ecosystem where heritage is both preserved and monetized effectively.

Thang Long Water Puppet Theater's Professionalization Model: Located in Hanoi, the Thang Long Water Puppet Theater is a prime example of how a traditional art form can become a commercially successful, "must-see" attraction for international tourists. The theater operates 365 days a year with multiple shows per day, a testament to its high demand and professional management. Its success lies in creating a high-quality, accessible, and engaging product. The shows are visually captivating, overcoming language barriers, and are accompanied by a live traditional orchestra that enhances the experience. Having toured over 40 countries, the theater has built a strong international brand. This model highlights the importance of professionalization, consistent quality, and strategic marketing in turning a niche art form into a flagship cultural tourism product.

4.6. Evaluation of the Theoretical Framework

The selection of this theoretical framework is the result of a thorough comparison and analysis of both domestic and international approaches. It reflects an interdisciplinary, practical, and humanistic research orientation, which is well aligned with the characteristics of the cultural management field and the complexity of the research subject, namely traditional performing arts in the context of urban tourism.

The four theories complement one another in explaining the phenomenon: stakeholder theory identifies the mechanisms of interaction among key actors; cultural ecology theory explores the relationship between the art form and its social and spatial environment; cultural economics theory analyzes the value conflicts and inherent economic challenges; and sustainable tourism theory offers a development direction that balances exploitation with conservation. Their combination expands the analytical scope across structural, contextual, communicative, and policy dimensions.

In the context of HCMC, a dynamic and multilayered urban area, the framework proves highly appropriate. It allows for the examination of the relationships between government, communities, and businesses, the definition of culturally specific spaces, the reception behaviors of younger audiences, and the demands for long-term policy planning. No single theory is sufficient to fully address the complexity of this issue, but together, the four provide a comprehensive and effective approach.

In terms of applicability, the theoretical framework supports both the analysis of the current situation and the formulation of practical solutions. These theories have been widely applied in studies of development, culture, and tourism, and can be adapted into models, evaluation criteria, or operational tools, particularly in the design of cultural tourism programs, sustainability indicators, and participatory mechanisms for artist communities.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has clarified the potential and current state of exploiting *Đờn ca tài tử* and *Cải lương* in tourism development in HCMC. Based on an interdisciplinary framework and qualitative data from in-depth interviews, the study reveals that the core challenge is not a lack of audience interest, but rather a structural “experience gap”: while tourists highly value the cultural essence of the performances, their overall satisfaction is diminished by inadequate physical environments and a lack of interactive opportunities. The findings affirm that integrating traditional arts into tourism is a vital opportunity for both economic development and cultural preservation. However, to be successful, a strategic shift is required from merely “selling performances” to “designing holistic cultural experiences.”

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the study proposes the following key recommendations:

- **Strengthen Inter-sectoral Coordination under a Unified Policy Framework:** This study recommends establishing a formal coordination mechanism under the direct leadership of the HCMC People’s Committee. This framework should align the strategic efforts of key departments—specifically the Department of Culture and Sports, the Department of Tourism, and the Department of Finance—and formalize collaboration with the artist community and private enterprises to ensure economic efficiency and achieve shared goals in developing high-quality cultural tourism products.
- **Develop Tiered “Experience Packages”:** Instead of

one-size-fits-all performances, create tiered product packages. This could include standard performance tickets, premium packages with backstage tours and artist meet-and-greets, and exclusive workshops, catering to different tourist segments and willingness to pay.

- **Invest in Technology to Bridge the Experience Gap:** Mandate the use of multilingual subtitles (e.g., via LED screens or mobile apps) for all performances targeting tourists. Explore the use of QR codes to provide contextual information and augmented reality (AR) to enhance storytelling, thereby addressing the strong demand for technology-enhanced experiences.
- **Upgrade Key Performance Venues:** Prioritize investment in upgrading the infrastructure of key venues like the Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theater and establishing dedicated, high-quality cultural spaces for *Đờn ca tài tử*, ensuring excellent acoustics, seating, and professional environments.
- **Create Fair Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms:** Develop clear guidelines and model contracts to ensure that artists, as the holders of cultural capital, receive a fair share of the revenue generated from tourism activities, thereby ensuring their long-term commitment and motivation.

Limitations

While this study provides in-depth qualitative insights, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- **Limited Generalizability:** As a qualitative study focused on HCMC, the findings are context-specific and may not be directly generalizable to other regions with different socio-cultural or institutional conditions.
- **Subjectivity of Qualitative Data:** The findings are based on interviews with a purposive sample of 20 stakeholders. While providing depth, these perspectives may not capture the full spectrum of opinions, and the interpretations are inherently shaped by the researchers’ analytical lens.
- **Dynamic Cultural Context:** The rapid evolution of digital media and entertainment preferences poses an ongoing challenge to the long-term applicability of the specific strategies proposed. Continuous market research is needed to adapt to changing tourist demands.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the editors and editorial staff of JHSSR for their assistance during publication period.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not employ any of the Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies for Language refinement, drafting background section and did not perform any Task of the technology.

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