



Oral Tradition and Cultural Identity in Vietnamese Folktales: An Asian Humanities Perspective

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Abstract. This article examines the intricate relationship between oral tradition and the construction of cultural identity among Vietnam’s ethnic minorities. As a multi-ethnic country, Vietnam possesses a rich treasury of folk narratives that serve not only as artistic heritage but also as living cultural archives. These narratives safeguard values, social structures and cosmological views transmitted across generations. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that combines folklore studies, cultural anthropology and Walter J. Ong’s perspectives on orality and literacy, the study argues that folk narratives represent a dynamic space where cultural identity is performed, retold, revised and continually re-created. The analysis highlights typical examples from the Ede epic *Dam San*, the Tay–Nung process of “localising” narrative poems and the Southeast Asian motif of the “persecuted orphan girl”. These cases demonstrate how oral storytelling functions as a strategy for minority communities to assert distinctive cultural identities amidst the pressures of globalisation and the transition toward literacy. The findings underscore the enduring vitality of oral traditions as cultural memory and their relevance to contemporary discussions on identity, education and cultural sustainability.

Keywords and phrases: oral tradition, cultural identity, folk narratives, Vietnam, Asian humanities

Introduction

Oral tradition, as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (n.d.), is a core component of intangible cultural heritage. It encompasses countless forms of verbal expression such as proverbs, riddles, folktales, myths, epics and songs. These are not inert relics of the past, but rather a “living heritage”, an essential medium for transmitting knowledge,

sociocultural values and communal memory from one generation to the next. In societies where writing has not yet taken deep root, oral tradition serves as the foundation of knowledge and the social glue that binds communities together.

Vietnam, with its 54 ethnic groups, offers a vibrant cultural mosaic in which the folktale treasury of 53 ethnic minorities becomes an invaluable resource for understanding the richness and diversity of national identity. These stories go beyond entertainment or moral instruction; they act as mirrors reflecting history, social structures, systems of belief, cultural memory and the unique worldview of each community. They are sites where cultural identity is formed, reinforced and powerfully expressed.

Yet, studying folk narratives should not stop at treating them as passive reflections. This article argues that Vietnamese ethnic folktales are living and dynamic repositories. Through the act of storytelling and the transformation of motifs, cultural identity is continuously performed, reinforced and re-created, particularly in contexts of regional cultural interaction and the challenges of globalisation. The relationship between storytelling and identity is dialectical: while community identity shapes the content and form of stories, the repeated acts of telling and retelling in different social contexts in turn consolidate and reshape identity for future generations. Fiction in this sense is collective, “polished” through multiple retellings. Each act of narration is not mere reproduction, but a process of “re-creating” identity in the present, in response to history, environment and the evolving needs of the community.

Literature Review

From orality to literacy: Walter J. Ong’s theoretical framework

To understand the nature of folktales, one must begin with the fundamental distinction between oral and literate cultures. In his seminal work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), Ong demonstrated that the emergence of writing was not merely a recording tool but a transformation that restructured human consciousness and modes of thought.

Ong argued that primary oral cultures—those with no knowledge of writing—organised knowledge and expressed themselves in ways markedly different from literate societies. Their thought exhibits several key characteristics:

1. Additive rather than subordinative – Ideas are linked by simple conjunctions such as “and...and...and...” rather than complex hierarchical syntax.
2. Redundant or copious – Repetition of ideas, formulas and fixed phrases ensures that listeners can follow and speakers can sustain their train of thought. Redundancy here is not verbosity but a mnemonic and communicative strategy.
3. Conservative and traditionalist – Since knowledge exists only in the living memory of the community—“you only know what you can recall”—oral societies prioritise the preservation of accumulated wisdom rather than radical innovation.
4. Situational and close to life-world – Oral thinking tends to be concrete and context-dependent, in contrast to the abstract, decontextualised reasoning typical of literate cultures.

Most importantly, Ong emphasised that in oral culture, the spoken word is an event, a powerful action occurring in time, rather than an object fixed on the page. This means the meaning of a tale resides not only in the text itself but also in its performance: the interaction between teller and audience, intonation, gestures and other paralinguistic cues that animate the story. Ong’s framework provides a valuable lens for decoding the poetics of folk narratives. Formulaic expressions, stock characters and repetitive structures should not be dismissed as artistic “simplicity” but understood as sophisticated mnemonic technologies optimised for an acoustic and event-centred medium.

Building on Ong’s insights into the interplay between orality and cultural identity, several interdisciplinary studies have advanced this field. In *Oral and Written Narratives and Cultural Identity: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (2007), Fagundes and Blayer explored the interweaving of oral and written narratives in shaping community identity. Similarly, in “Vietnamese Traditional Narratives as Ecological Parables Promoting an Ecological Ethos” (2025), Le Duc analysed Vietnamese folk narratives as ecological parables contributing to moral-ecological consciousness. In a different context, Sarkar (2020) has highlighted oral traditions in the Asian highlands, particularly Northeast India, underlining the role of storytelling in sustaining collective memory and cultural identity. Likewise, Saikia (2023) demonstrated how oral traditions and folklore serve as vital tools for ethnic minority groups in Asia to reaffirm identity. In the broader Southeast Asian context, Barkah and Desman (2025) applied Levi-Strauss’s structuralism to analyse Nusantara folklore, revealing how narrative structures deeply encode cultural identity.

The concept of “national cultural identity” in the Vietnamese context

In Vietnamese scholarly discourse, *ban sac van hoa dan toc* or “national cultural identity” is regarded as a central concept. It is commonly defined as the synthesis of core material and spiritual values that are enduring, distinctive and serve to differentiate one nation from others. According to Nguyen and Vu (2020), cultural identity has three fundamental characteristics: (1) inheritance across generations, (2) selectivity in the process of development and (3) diversity within a multi-ethnic nation.

National cultural identity is expressed through various elements, including language, customs, religious beliefs, clothing, cuisine and communicative norms. For ethnic minorities in Vietnam, cultural identity is closely linked with their living space – the natural environment of mountains, rivers and swidden fields. These are not merely settings of life but integral factors shaping worldviews, modes of production and systems of spiritual and cultural knowledge (Phan 2001). Nguyen (2021) further reinforces this view, positing that Vietnamese folk culture acts as a resilient mechanism for preserving national character against external assimilative forces.

As culture is a human creation, it constantly evolves with socio-economic changes. In Vietnam, the processes of renovation (*doi moi*) and international integration have posed both challenges and opportunities for national cultural identity. On the one hand, traditional values are preserved and enhanced; on the other hand, new values emerge and enrich the system of cultural resources, thereby contributing to national development. Yet, activating this system of values remains challenging. As Nguyen and Vu (2020) note, the crucial issue lies in how to selectively inherit traditional values while effectively absorbing global cultural achievements in the context of globalisation.

Research on Vietnamese folklore has a long history, beginning with the collection and classification efforts of pioneering scholars such as Nguyen Dong Chi, Bui Van Nguyen and Dinh Gia Khanh, later advanced by Phan Dang Nhat and Vo Quang Nhon. Their works clarified the genre-specific characteristics (epics, narrative poems), thematic and artistic values and thereby affirmed the position of ethnic minority folklore in Vietnamese literature (Nguyen 1972). The present study inherits this scholarly legacy but situates the discussion within an interdisciplinary framework, approaching cultural identity in the wider contexts of globalisation and cultural anthropology.

An Asian humanities approach: Folktales as “cultural artifacts”

Within the framework of Asian humanities, folktales are not merely literary texts but are understood as “cultural artifacts”. Here, artifact does not imply a tangible object but rather a spiritual product that reflects socio-historical contexts while preserving systems of values, norms and community identity. As Zhang (2015) emphasises, folklore is the foundation of “folkloric identity”, which transcends rigid categories of ethnicity or nation and is instead based on the shared practice of cultural traditions.

For example, in Vietnamese tales such as *Tam Cam*, the motif of the persecuted orphan is not simply a literary device; it embodies communal notions of justice, morality and the aspiration for fairness. Each retelling of such tales is also an act of reasserting and re-creating these cultural values. Asian humanities provide an interdisciplinary methodology to study such cultural products. Similarly, McCabe and Kim (2022) argue that East and Southeast Asian folktales share underlying narrative structures that reflect deep regional interconnectedness while maintaining local distinctiveness. Analysing a folktale through this lens requires consideration of multiple dimensions: the historical-cultural context in which it was produced; the identity of both storytellers and audiences; the underlying systems of mythology and belief; and the ways in which the tale interacts with, reinforces or challenges social norms. Folklore thus plays a central role in shaping what Zhang (2015) calls “folkloric identity”. This identity is not fixed by rigid ethnic or national markers but is sustained through the collective practice of traditions, ensuring cultural cohesion and continuity.

Such an approach reconciles a latent tension in the concept of identity. While Vietnamese definitions often emphasise stability and “core” values, contemporary anthropology views identity as a dynamic process – constantly constructed and negotiated. Folktales stand at this intersection: they preserve collective memory and traditional values, while simultaneously providing space for reinterpretation and re-creation according to contemporary contexts. For instance, the motif of the persecuted orphan girl conveys different meanings in different eras. In traditional agrarian society, it reaffirmed the moral belief that “virtue will be rewarded”. In modern contexts, the same motif can be read as a discourse on gender, critiquing inequality and expressing the desire for women’s emancipation.

When situated in cross-cultural perspective, treating tales as cultural artifacts reveals both shared values and diverse expressions of identity. Familiar motifs in Vietnamese folktales can be compared with Chinese, Japanese or Indian

tales to highlight common Asian values such as filial piety, karmic justice and communal solidarity, while also showcasing each culture's unique nuances. For example, the persecuted orphan motif appears in *Cinderella* in the West, but in the Vietnamese context, *Tam* is not only a victim but also embedded within Buddhist notions of karma and retribution. This illustrates the interweaving of folklore and religious cosmologies in Asia. This phenomenon is well-explained by the concept of “cultural additivity”, where Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism interact to shape behavioural norms and moral outcomes in Vietnamese folktales (Vuong et al. 2018). Such comparisons underscore that folktales function as cultural “stages” where communities affirm their identities while engaging in regional and global dialogues.

Approaching folktales from Asian humanities as cultural artifacts thus offers a multi-layered vision: tales as collective memory, as spaces of negotiated identity and as bridges of intercultural connection. This method enables us to identify universal humanistic values without erasing the unique identities of individual traditions.

Methodology

To achieve the stated objectives, this article employs a qualitative research approach, primarily based on the analysis of published materials (desk-based research). The study follows an interdisciplinary orientation, integrating methodologies from multiple fields in order to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding:

1. Textual analysis – This is the core method, focusing on the close reading of folktale texts. The process involves examining narrative structures, character systems, recurring motifs and linguistic or stylistic features. Such analysis goes beyond aesthetics, aiming to decode the layers of cultural meaning embedded within the stories.
2. Cultural anthropology – This approach situates folktales within their socio-cultural contexts. Rather than treating them as isolated texts, it interprets details—such as customs, rituals, architecture and cosmological ideas—in connection with social practices, belief systems and worldviews of the communities that produced them.
3. Comparative literature – To highlight both commonalities and specificities, a comparative perspective is applied to juxtapose narrative motifs across ethnic groups in Vietnam and with neighbouring Southeast

Asian traditions. This comparison makes it possible to identify historical flows of cultural exchange as well as the ways each community adopts and transforms shared elements to assert its own uniqueness.

The primary data for this study consists of folktale texts of Vietnam's ethnic minorities that have been collected, transcribed, translated and published by respected scholars in large-scale projects such as the *General Collection of Folklore of Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities* (Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies 2025), along with monographs by pioneering folklorists such as Nguyen Dong Chi, Phan Dang Nhat and Nguyen Thi Hue. Secondary data includes theoretical and analytical works by both Vietnamese and international scholars on folklore, orality and the humanities.

Results and Discussion

The epic as a “social charter”: The case of the Ede epic *Dam San*

The heroic epic *Dam San* of the Ede people is not only a highly artistic piece of oral literature but can also be regarded as a “social charter” – an unwritten text that encodes and legitimises the community's social structures, customary laws and foundational values (Ngo and Nguyen 2021). Through the journey of the hero *Dam San*, the epic vividly expresses the cultural identity of the Ede.

Literature and art are integral components of culture. They reflect cultural processes in which human beings and social life are the central subjects, embodying humanity's aspiration for truth, goodness and beauty. As Bakhtin (1989) reminds us, “Literature is an inseparable part of culture. It cannot be understood apart from the integral style of the whole culture of the era in which it exists. It cannot be isolated from other parts of culture”.

The epic is one of the earliest long narrative poems in human history, celebrating heroic achievements of collective significance and of profound meaning to the people at the dawn of their history. The Ede epic represents the very soul of Ede culture and is a genuine product of a civilisation in transformation. As an oral narrative tradition, the epic has been preserved through generations of oral performance, forming part of the community's living heritage.

The *Dam San* epic serves as a rich description of Ede customs, rituals and beliefs, as well as a repository of their social and moral lessons. It reflects their cosmology and spiritual world, portraying the ancient Ede society as egalitarian

and prosperous, deeply rooted in its communal traditions. In the words of Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1982), the epic space is “a place where both what has happened and what may happen unfold – representing the cosmos, a world with structure”. Thus, the *Dam San* epic functions not merely as a narrative of one hero’s exploits, but as a cultural mirror of the Ede community, capturing their worldview, ideals and enduring values. The epic space encapsulates the diverse life of a people during the most memorable moments of their national history. As one scholar observes, “Truly unique epics present a portrait of the national spirit, reflected in family morality, in war and peace, in needs, in art, customs and interests – in short, they provide us with a panoramic view of the stages and the quality of consciousness” (as cited in Thuy 2021). The epic space is thus a highly generalised space, deeply realistic and capable of accommodating many different layers of spatial representation.

The *Dam San* epic is inseparable from Ede beliefs, rituals and communal life. Its epic space serves as a cultural anchor for preserving and transmitting the heritage of the Ede people. According to Ede cosmology, the world is divided into three realms: the sky, the earth and the underworld. Within these realms dwell the deities who govern and influence human existence (Phan 1998). From birth to death, every Ede individual participates in essential rituals that are part of both life cycle and communal belief systems.

The *Dam San* epic recounts the struggle of the hero, Dam San, against customary laws. It unfolds as a long narrative with hundreds of characters, traversing four layers of space: the heavens, the earth, the underworld and the waters. All of these are expressed in verse and performed with music, resonating with varied tones, melodies and rhythms. Through this poetic performance, the daily life of Ede villages emerges in vivid detail, capturing their traditions, customs and beliefs (Le 2021).

Matrilineal system and cultural identity in the *Dam San* epic

One of the most distinctive features highlighted in Ede society is its matrilineal system. Within the family, the woman is the head of the household, children bear their mother’s surname and sons are not entitled to inheritance. In marriage, young Ede women traditionally take the initiative in choosing their partners. After the wedding, the husband moves into the wife’s household. According to the custom of *jue nue* (levirate marriage), if the wife dies, the husband must remarry a sister of the deceased wife. If there is no sister available, he is obliged to return to his own sisters. Conversely, if the husband dies, the husband’s family must provide another son to continue the marriage tie. This custom reflects the legacy of Cham feudal culture, which deeply influenced Ede society over a long historical period.

In terms of religion, the majority of Ede people follow Protestantism, while a smaller number practice Catholicism. Dak Lak Province, home to the largest Ede population, is also the centre of Protestant Christianity in Vietnam, considered one of the most significant hubs of the religion in Indochina. Alongside religion, the Ede possess a rich treasury of oral literature, especially their famous epics such as *Dam San*, *Xing Nha*, *M'Drong Dam* and *Khing Ju*. These epics celebrate mighty heroes with extraordinary strength who protect their villages during the formative stages of clan development. Traditionally, they are performed orally during major festivals, ensuring that future generations remember their ancestral roots. Like other Central Highlands peoples, the Ede also maintain annual rituals and festivals—including buffalo sacrifice, *ko pan* (ceremonial bench), spring festivals, water source worship, jar worship, new rice celebrations, funeral ceremonies and naming rituals—to express wishes for health, prosperity and bountiful harvests for both families and the community.

The entire social structure and relationships depicted in the epic revolve around this principle. The fact that Dam San had to follow the custom of *jue nue* by marrying the sisters, H'Nhi and H'Bhi, after his uncle's death affirms the supremacy of customary law in maintaining kinship stability and communal cohesion. Female authority and the power of the maternal line are emphasised when Dam San, after marriage, resides in his wife's family and bears the responsibility of enriching and expanding her clan's land.

The material cultural identity of the Ede is also vividly expressed through the image of the longhouse and the prosperity of the village. The house of Dam San is described with exaggerated details—"so long that the sound of gongs struck at one end could not be heard at the other", "the veranda roof stretched so wide that birds grew weary flying across"—to symbolise the strength and wealth of a great chief. The longhouse was not merely a dwelling but also the centre of communal life, where important rituals were performed and where the unity of the extended matrilineal family was embodied (Vo 2007).

The hero Dam San himself embodies the ideals and virtues of the community, becoming what Phan (2003) described as a "fundamental attribute of the epic". He was not only a valiant warrior, defeating rival chiefs such as M'tao Gru and M'tao M'xay to protect tribal honour and unity, but also a labour hero, leading his people in farming and hunting. His aspiration to conquer the sun goddess—though ending in tragedy—expresses the extraordinary will of humankind to stand equal with natural and supernatural forces, embodying the epic-era desire to master destiny (Phan 2001). Thus, the *Dam San* epic does not simply recount a story; it constructs and reinforces a comprehensive value system, spanning from social structure to human ideals, thereby shaping the cultural identity of the Ede people.

“Localisation” as a strategy of identity assertion: The case of *Nom* verse narratives of the Tay people

If the *Dam San* epic embodies an inward crystallisation of cultural identity, then the *Nom* verse narratives of the Tay people illustrate a dynamic strategy of identity assertion through the reception and transformation of external cultural elements. Many Tay *Nom* verse tales drew their plots from Kinh folktales or Chinese literature. Yet they are not simple reproductions. Instead, they underwent a profound process of “Tay-isation”, demonstrating the agency and creativity of Tay culture. These verse narratives, preserved in the Tay’s own script system, are regarded as one of the most significant achievements of Tay literature. They encapsulate spiritual values, practical wisdom, codes of conduct, linguistic forms, ways of life and customary practices transmitted across generations.

This localisation process unfolded on several dimensions. First was spatialisation: situating the stories within the lived landscape of the Tay. Instead of imperial capitals or bustling markets, the narratives unfolded in high mountains, deep streams and dense forests. Characters lived in stilt houses, a hallmark of Tay architecture. Transforming the physical environment into a narrative space rooted the tales firmly in community life and consciousness. Here, landscape is not merely decorative background but a constitutive element of identity, inscribed into collective memory and affirming the inseparable bond between people and their homeland.

Second was the integration of customs. Everyday practices and social rituals of the Tay were naturally woven into the plotlines – such as the custom of *o re* (uxorilocal residence), carrying rice balls into the forest, warm hospitality or detailed depictions of wedding and funeral rites. These details rendered the stories intimate and unmistakably stamped with Tay cultural identity.

Final one was the adaptation of belief systems. The narrative world was restructured in line with the Tay cosmology of three realms (*muong troi* [the heavenly realm], *tran gian* [the human world] and *am phu* [the underworld]). Supernatural beings such as deities, spirits and fairies intervened in human life in ways that resonated with Tay belief. This process of “Tay-isation” reveals a sophisticated cultural strategy: external elements were not passively adopted but actively transformed to strengthen and enrich local identity.

In this sense, cultural identity is shown not as a closed, immutable essence but as a continuous process of dialogue and creativity. The *Nom* verse narratives of the Tay people embody a dynamic balance: borrowing and transforming,

and conserving and innovating, affirming a unique voice while engaging with broader cultural currents.

Comparative motif analysis: “The persecuted orphan girl” in a cross-cultural context

Comparative study of recurrent narrative motifs is an effective method for identifying both the shared cultural strata of a region and the distinctive features of individual communities. The motif of the persecuted orphan girl, most famously represented in Vietnam by the tale *Tam Cam*, is a striking example. This motif is widespread across the world and especially prominent in Southeast Asia, indicating a cultural-historical landscape with deep commonalities (Le 2020). Its basic structure often involves a virtuous orphaned girl mistreated by a stepmother and stepsisters, aided by a supernatural power, married to a prince, betrayed and killed, but restored to life through multiple transformations before finally reclaiming happiness. Yet each society expresses this structure through its own cultural imagery and daily life.

The Vietnamese *Tam Cam* tale emerged within the wet-rice agrarian milieu, so its details bear the imprints of rural Vietnam. Folklore does not merely entertain but conveys aspirations through the miraculous. In *Tam Cam*, the supernatural helper is *But*, a unique Vietnamese adaptation of the magical helper motif. Unlike the fairies common in Western tales, *But* appears repeatedly to console *Tam* with the familiar formula: “Why are you crying, my child?”. This figure symbolises not blind intervention but a guiding presence, offering direction while leaving decisive action to the human protagonist. The relationship is cooperative: the supernatural provides opportunities, but human agency must seize them. Artistically, the magical elements are rationalised and integrated with rural life—fish bones turning into fine clothes, sparrows assisting in rice sorting—anchored in the ordinary rhythms of village existence.

At the same time, the tale shares universal motifs with the global “Cinderella type”. The shoe test motif, for example, marks the turning point from oppression to liberation. In Vietnam, *Tam* loses her shoe in a village festival and the shoe—magically fashioned from fish bones—signals her worthiness. In France, Cinderella drops her slipper at midnight as the fairy’s spell ends, with the prince himself retrieving it. One context resonates with the communal village festival, the other with the royal ballroom. Both, however, elevate feminine beauty and virtue through a simple object imbued with magical significance.

What distinguishes *Tam Cam* most vividly is the cycle of transformations after Tam's death – into a golden bird, a fruit tree, a weaving loom and finally a fragrant persimmon fruit (Tran 2009). These metamorphoses are not mere plot devices but embody the animist worldview and cyclical cosmology of the Vietnamese, affirming the indestructible vitality of life and its deep bond with nature. The retributive ending, where Cam suffers the consequences of her cruelty, reflects the folk principle of moral causality: “You reap what you sow”.

By comparing this motif across cultures, one sees how a shared narrative template refracts into diverse cultural spectrums. The orphan girl tale becomes a prism: a common plot line (the light) passes through different cultural lenses and refracts into distinct versions (the spectrum), each illuminating the unique values (the colours) of a community. Thus, the Vietnamese *Tam Cam*, while resonating with global archetypes, affirms its particular identity through local cosmology, agrarian imagery and moral philosophy.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of “the abused orphan girl” motif in Southeast Asia

Ethnic group/ nation	Representative tale	Forms of transformation/ metamorphosis of the protagonist	Cultural values emphasised
Vietnamese (Kinh)	<i>Tam Cam</i>	Oriole (yellow bird), peach tree, weaving loom, persimmon.	Strong vitality, relentless struggle to reclaim happiness, strict karmic justice.
Lao	<i>Nang Phom Hom</i> (<i>The Fragrant- Haired Maiden</i>)	Transformations may vary, often associated with local natural elements.	Influenced by Theravada Buddhism, often emphasising compassion and forgiveness.
Cambodian	<i>Neang Kantoc</i>	Transformations often bear marks of Hindu mythology due to Indian cultural influence.	Relationship with royalty, elements of divine authority and the concept of karma.
Tay (Vietnam)	Local variants	Transformations linked with Tay folk beliefs and their mountainous forest environment.	Harmony with nature, communal village values and indigenous cosmology.

Conclusion

This study has examined the folktales of Vietnam's ethnic minorities as a dynamic space where cultural identity is performed, constructed and reinforced. Through the theoretical lens of Walter J. Ong's orality and the interdisciplinary approach of Asian humanities, several key conclusions can be drawn.

First, folktales—particularly epics—function as “social charters”, encoding and legitimising the social structures, customary laws and ideals of the community. The case of the Ede epic *Dam San* demonstrates how the work not only reflects but also strengthens the matrilineal order, emphasises communal solidarity and affirms the human aspiration to conquer and expand.

Second, ethnic minority communities reveal their agency and cultural creativity through processes of “localisation”. The “Tay-isation” of borrowed narrative materials illustrates a deliberate cultural strategy to anchor stories within the “habitat space” and value systems of the Tay people, transforming what is borrowed into something uniquely their own.

Third, the comparative analysis of shared narrative motifs across the region, such as the motif of “the abused orphan girl”, shows how folktales simultaneously testify to cultural exchanges and act as prisms that highlight each community's distinctive values and worldview. Variations in transformation sequences or in the enactment of justice reflect deeply rooted and unique cultural conceptions.

These findings carry significant implications for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. In the context of globalisation and the dominance of literacy and digital media, oral traditions face the risk of decline. Preservation should not stop at documentation and archiving but must prioritise sustaining this “living heritage” in its natural performative contexts, encouraging intergenerational transmission and creating new spaces for stories to be told, heard and reimagined.

Future research may explore the impact of modern media—what Ong (1982) calls “secondary orality”—on the transformation of folktales, the role of women as custodians and transmitters of oral knowledge or investigate less-studied motifs to offer a more comprehensive picture of the richness of minority cultures in Vietnam.

More broadly, many nations increasingly regard cultural “soft power” as a critical resource to leverage comprehensive national strength—including politics, economy, natural resources, human capital, science and technology,

security and diplomacy—in order to enhance competitiveness and international standing (Do, Dang and Nguyen 2025). For Vietnam, this means opening up, integrating and selectively absorbing the values and achievements of world civilisations, while at the same time safeguarding and nurturing its noble, distinctive cultural identity. Here lies a dialectical process: between endogenous cultural strength and the capacity to assimilate external influences. To protect national identity must go hand in hand with expanding international exchanges — absorbing selectively what is progressive in other cultures while reaffirming what is authentically our own.

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