

VIETNAM'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY WITH ASEAN (1995–2025): FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE AND LESSONS LEARNED

Mai Quoc Dung¹

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century marks a profound transformation in international relations, where non-traditional factors, particularly culture, are increasingly asserting their strategic position and importance. Cultural diplomacy, inherently an exchange, interaction, and promotion of cultural values between nations, has evolved beyond mere cultural exchange activities to become a sharp instrument in foreign policy. Joseph S. Nye Jr., a pioneer of the “soft power” concept, emphasized that: “Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”²

¹ Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam.

² J. S. Nye, Jr., *SOFT POWER: THE MEANS TO SUCCESS IN WORLD POLITICS* (2004), at 10.

In this context, culture serves as a core resource that generates this attraction, enabling a nation to build a positive image, foster trust, gain support, and advance foreign policy objectives peacefully and sustainably. Milton C. Cummings Jr. also affirmed the indispensable role of cultural diplomacy, asserting that it is not merely a supplementary soft tool but a core component of foreign policy strategy, directly impacting how other nations perceive and interact with a country.³ For this reason, cultural diplomacy has become an inseparable and increasingly prioritized part of many countries' foreign policy strategies worldwide, especially in an environment of global integration and competition.

Within the Southeast Asian context, where cultural, historical, and institutional diversity coexists with common integration goals, cultural diplomacy plays an even more crucial role. Since its establishment in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has continuously evolved

³ M. C. Cummings, *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*, Center for Arts and Culture (2004).

from an initial loose cooperative bloc into a robust Community based on three main pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).⁴ The formation of the ASCC clearly demonstrates member states' recognition of the importance of culture and people in building a unified regional identity, fostering cohesion, and improving the quality of life for their citizens.⁵ Within the ASCC framework, cultural diplomacy serves not only as a bridge between diverse cultures but also as a powerful catalyst, bringing member states closer, sharing common values, jointly addressing social issues, and building a common prosperous future. As T. M. H Duong pointed out, “cultural diplomacy is highly regarded as 'soft power' in protecting national interests and enhancing national standing in the international

⁴ ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter*, ASEAN Secretariat (2007), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

⁵ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Community Vision 2025*, ASEAN Secretariat (2015), <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf>.

arena,” contributing to establishing a peaceful, stable environment and promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the region.⁶

In this dynamic regional integration landscape, Vietnam, as an active, proactive, and responsible member of ASEAN, has always deeply understood the strategic importance of cultural diplomacy in achieving its foreign policy objectives. Since joining ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam has consistently strived to contribute to the bloc's overall development, especially in the fields of culture, sports, and tourism. Vietnamese culture, with its thousands of years of history and rich diversity, holds immense “soft power” to promote the national image, attract partners, and contribute to building an ASEAN Community oriented towards its people, centered on its people, socially responsible, and harmonious “for the future of a united and strong ASEAN

⁶ T. M. H. Duong, *Ngoại giao văn hóa góp phần thực hiện chính sách tích cực, chủ động hội nhập quốc tế*. [Cultural diplomacy contributes to implementing an active and proactive international integration policy.], *Tạp chí điện tử Lý luận Chính trị* (2023), <https://lyluanchinhtri.vn/ngoi-giao-van-hoa-gop-phan-thuc-hien-chinh-sach-tich-cuc-chu-dong-hoi-nhap-quoc-te-81.html>.

Community.”⁷ Vietnam's foreign policy consistently prioritizes culture as a pillar, reflected in the resolutions and directives of the Party and State.⁸ As D. H Vu emphasized, cultural diplomacy is a special field of diplomatic activity, involving the use of culture as both an object and a means to achieve the fundamental goals of a nation's foreign policy, creating a positive image of the country, and promoting national culture and language.⁹

However, the practical implementation of cultural diplomacy always comes with many challenges, requiring flexibility, creativity, and sustainable resources. Although Vietnam has made significant achievements in enhancing its position and image through cultural activities, there are still gaps and limitations that need to be identified and

⁷ T. T. Y. Nguyen, *Ngoại giao văn hóa Việt Nam với ASEAN trong thời kỳ hội nhập* [Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN in the period of integration], Doctoral dissertation in Cultural Studies, Hanoi University of Culture (2016), at 61.

⁸ T. T. M. Tran, *Phát huy kinh tế di sản văn hóa - động lực cho phát triển kinh tế - xã hội* [Promoting cultural heritage economy - a driving force for socio-economic development] (2024).

⁹ D. H. Vu, *Ngoại giao và công tác ngoại giao* [Diplomacy and diplomatic work], National Political Truth Publishing House (2009), at 311.

overcome. H. S. Bui analyzed that “international integration is an objective trend today, bringing both opportunities and challenges for the development of countries worldwide in many fields, including culture.”¹⁰ The question is how Vietnam–ASEAN cultural diplomacy can maximize its effectiveness in the context of increasingly deep integration, fierce cultural competition, and rapid changes in information technology. Researching, evaluating practical activities, and drawing lessons learned are extremely necessary to optimize the cultural diplomacy strategy in the future.

Stemming from the aforementioned context and practical issues, this paper will systematically analyze Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN. Specifically, the paper will clarify the concept and theoretical basis of cultural diplomacy in international relations and the ASEAN region,

¹⁰ H. S. Bui, Chính sách văn hóa ở nước ta trong bối cảnh hội nhập quốc tế hiện nay [Cultural policy in our country in the current context of international integration]. *Tạp chí Cộng sản* (2024), https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/media-story/-/asset_publisher/V8hnp4dK31Gf/content/ chinh-sach-van-hoa-o-nuoc-ta-trong-boi-can-hoi-nhap-quoc-te-hien-nay.

providing a solid theoretical foundation for examining the practical implementation of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN member states. These activities will be comprehensively evaluated, including prominent successes that have contributed to promoting Vietnam's image and strengthening regional friendship, as well as existing limitations that need to be overcome to enhance effectiveness. Finally, based on these in-depth analyses, the paper will draw important lessons learned and propose specific policy recommendations to improve the effectiveness of Vietnam–ASEAN cultural diplomacy in the current era of integration.

The research objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive and in-depth overview of Vietnam–ASEAN cultural diplomacy. Specific objectives include: Analyzing the theories and roles of cultural diplomacy in modern foreign policy and within the ASEAN Community context; Systematizing and evaluating the current state of cultural diplomacy activities implemented by Vietnam with ASEAN,

identifying prominent achievements as well as existing challenges and limitations; Proposing feasible, strategic, and highly applicable solutions to enhance the effectiveness of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN, thereby promoting the sustainable development and cohesion of the ASEAN Community.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND VIETNAM – ASEAN RELATIONS

A. Concept and Role of Cultural Diplomacy

In the context of contemporary international relations, cultural diplomacy has emerged as an essential tool, complementing and sometimes substituting traditional diplomatic methods. This concept has continuously evolved and expanded, reflecting the complexity of transnational interactions in a globalized world.

1. Defining Cultural Diplomacy: Soft Power, Cultural Exchange, and National Image Promotion

Cultural diplomacy, in essence, is the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture between nations and peoples to enhance mutual understanding.¹¹ This is not merely about showcasing artworks or organizing festivals, but also a process of building people-to-people bridges, creating empathy and connection. One of the foundational concepts explaining the power of cultural diplomacy is “soft power,” proposed by Joseph S. Nye Jr.¹² According to Nye, soft power is the ability to influence others to get what you want through the attraction of culture, political values, and foreign policy, rather than through coercion or payment. He argued that, in an increasingly complex world, hard power (military, economic) is insufficient to solve all problems, and soft power

¹¹ M. C. Cummings, *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*, Center for Arts and Culture (2004).

¹² J. S. Nye, Jr., *BOUND TO LEAD: THE CHANGING NATURE OF AMERICAN POWER* (1990); J. S. Nye, Jr., *SOFT POWER: THE MEANS TO SUCCESS IN WORLD POLITICS* (2004).

becomes a key factor in building consensus and establishing sustainable influence.¹³

Cultural diplomacy is the concrete manifestation of soft power, focusing on using cultural elements to achieve diplomatic objectives. It encompasses a diverse range of activities such as art exchanges, academic exchanges, cultural exhibitions, scientific cooperation, and tourism promotion. These activities not only help a nation introduce its identity and values but also create a “common space” for dialogue and cooperation. Nicholas J. Cull views cultural diplomacy as part of public diplomacy, focusing on influencing the attitudes and behaviors of foreign publics through cultural activities to foster understanding and a positive image. Through this, cultural diplomacy helps build a “nation brand,” an intangible but immensely valuable asset in the competitive international environment.¹⁴ T. T. Y Nguyen, in her dissertation, also emphasized:

¹³ J. S. Nye, Jr., *SOFT POWER: THE MEANS TO SUCCESS IN WORLD POLITICS* (2004).

¹⁴ N. J. Cull, *PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: FOUNDATIONS FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE* (2019).

“Cultural diplomacy is a specific diplomatic field involving the establishment, development, and maintenance of relations with other countries in the cultural sphere to promote, exchange culture, and leverage the soft power of culture to achieve national foreign policy objectives.”¹⁵ This reflects a profound awareness of culture's potential in serving national interests.

2. The Importance of Cultural Diplomacy in International Relations and Regional Integration

In a multipolar, interdependent world, the importance of cultural diplomacy is increasingly affirmed in many aspects.

First, it is an effective tool for building trust and mutual understanding between nations. When the public and elites of one country understand the culture, history, and people of another, prejudices and misunderstandings can be resolved, thereby

¹⁵ T. T. Y. Nguyen, *Ngoại giao văn hóa Việt Nam với ASEAN trong thời kỳ hội nhập* [Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN in the period of integration], Doctoral dissertation in Cultural Studies, Hanoi University of Culture (2016), at 26.

creating a solid foundation for political and economic cooperation. J. Melissen asserted that public diplomacy, including cultural diplomacy, is essential to bridging the perception gap between nations.¹⁶

Second, cultural diplomacy helps enhance national influence and standing in the international arena. By promoting unique and attractive cultural values, a nation can generate strong appeal, thereby increasing its ability to lead and shape global trends. This is particularly important for developing countries like Vietnam, where hard power is still limited. M.P. Doan clearly stated that cultural diplomacy “demonstrates its pervasive reach, effectiveness, and practicality; it helps strengthen our country's foreign relations at both the state-to-state level and fosters good relations between Vietnamese people and other countries,” affirming national

¹⁶ J. Melissen, *THE NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: SOFT POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS* (2005).

identity and enhancing its standing and prestige in the international arena.¹⁷

Third, cultural diplomacy contributes to socio-economic development through promoting tourism, attracting investment, and facilitating cultural exchange. When culture is widely promoted, it stimulates the desire for discovery and experience, thereby generating direct and indirect economic benefits. This is an aspect that many countries, including Vietnam, are actively exploiting.

Fourth, in the context of regional integration like ASEAN, cultural diplomacy is a key factor in building a cohesive community with a shared identity. ASEAN is not merely an economic or political alliance but also a diverse cultural community. Cultural diplomacy helps member states find commonalities, respect differences, and

¹⁷ M. P. Doan, *Ngoại giao văn hóa nâng tầm vị thế Việt Nam trên trường quốc tế*. [Cultural diplomacy enhances Vietnam's position in the international arena.], *Tạp chí Việt Nam hội nhập* (2024), <https://vietnamhoinhap.vn/vi/ngoi-giao-van-hoa-nang-tam-vi-the-viet-nam-tren-truong-quoc-te-46642.htm>.

collectively build the “ASEAN Way.”¹⁸ It facilitates multilateral cooperation initiatives in various fields such as heritage preservation, artistic development, and academic exchange, contributing to the achievement of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community's goals.

B. Context of Formation and Development of Vietnam – ASEAN Relations

Understanding the formation and development process of ASEAN, as well as Vietnam's accession and deep integration into the bloc, provides the basis for evaluating Vietnam's cultural diplomacy strategy within the regional framework.

1. The Genesis and Evolution of ASEAN

ASEAN was established on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand, by five original member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and

¹⁸ A. Acharya, *CONSTRUCTING A SECURITY COMMUNITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: ASEAN AND THE PROBLEM OF REGIONAL ORDER* (3rd ed.) (2009), <https://fmc90.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/constructing-a-security-in-asean.pdf>.

Thailand.¹⁹ The organization's initial objectives primarily focused on promoting economic, social, and cultural cooperation, while maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia amidst the Cold War and geopolitical instability. The Bangkok Declaration was ASEAN's founding document, laying the groundwork for fundamental principles such as non-interference in each other's internal affairs, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for national independence and sovereignty.

Over five decades, ASEAN has continuously expanded and evolved, admitting Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999), completing the vision of an ASEAN comprising all 10 Southeast Asian nations. From a loose organization, ASEAN has transformed into a Community with deeper integration goals, culminating in the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015 with three pillars: APSC, AEC,

¹⁹ ASEAN. *The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration)*. ASEAN Secretariat (1967),
<https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20140117154159.pdf>.

and ASCC.²⁰ This development reflects the regional leaders' vision for a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cohesive Southeast Asia. According to Acharya, the “ASEAN Way” – a method of dialogue, consensus, and non-interference – has become a unique model in regional cooperation.^{21\}

2. Vietnam's Accession and Deep Integration into ASEAN

Vietnam officially became the 7th member of ASEAN on July 28, 1995. This event marked a crucial historical milestone in Vietnam's foreign policy, shifting from confrontation to regional and international integration.²² Joining ASEAN not only

²⁰ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Community Vision 2025*, ASEAN Secretariat (2015), <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf>.

²¹ A. Acharya, *CONSTRUCTING A SECURITY COMMUNITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: ASEAN AND THE PROBLEM OF REGIONAL ORDER* (3rd ed.) (2009), <https://fmc90.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/constructing-a-security-in-asean.pdf>.

²² H. Vu, *Dấu ấn Việt Nam trong ASEAN: Đồng hành, lớn mạnh cùng năm tháng* [Vietnam's imprint in ASEAN: Accompanying and growing with time]. *Tạp chí Cộng sản* (2023), <https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/guest/quoc-phong-an-ninh-oi-ngoi1/-/2018/828918/dau-an-viet-nam-trong-asean--dong-hanh%2C-lon-manh-cung-nam-thang.aspx>.

helped Vietnam break through the embargo and expand economic-political relations but also affirmed Vietnam's desire for a peaceful, stable, and cooperative Southeast Asia.

Since then, Vietnam has actively participated in all areas of ASEAN cooperation. From fulfilling trade liberalization commitments within the AEC to contributing to regional security initiatives in the APSC, and especially actively participating in ASCC activities. Vietnam has proactively proposed numerous initiatives and contributed to the drafting of important ASEAN documents such as the ASEAN Charter and the Master Plans for the ASEAN Community.²³ As a rotating ASEAN Chair multiple times (2010, 2020), Vietnam has demonstrated its ability to lead and coordinate the bloc's cooperative efforts, affirming its position as a responsible and reliable member (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). This deep integration process has created a favorable

²³ ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter*, ASEAN Secretariat (2007), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

environment, but simultaneously placed higher demands on Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities.

3. Cultural Cooperation Framework in ASEAN (ASCC - ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community)

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is one of the three main pillars of the ASEAN Community, playing an essential role in building a people-centered community, promoting environmental sustainability, and social development.²⁴ The ASCC focuses on improving the quality of life for ASEAN citizens through promoting cooperation in fields such as culture, education, health, labor, environment, social development, and disaster management.

Within the ASCC framework, cultural cooperation is particularly emphasized to build a common identity and sense of community. The main objectives of cultural cooperation within ASCC

²⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Community Vision 2025*, ASEAN Secretariat (2015), <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf>.

include: (1) Promoting understanding and appreciation of the region's cultural diversity; (2) Preserving and promoting ASEAN cultural heritage; (3) Encouraging cultural creativity and innovation; and (4) Enhancing cultural exchange among member states and with the outside world.²⁵ To achieve these goals, many cooperation mechanisms and programs have been established, such as the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI), the ASEAN Cultural Fund (ACF), and a series of multilateral cooperation activities and projects on arts, heritage, and cultural education. These frameworks and mechanisms have provided a solid foundation and direction for Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN countries. T. T. Y. Nguyen also dedicated a significant portion of her dissertation to analyzing the structure and functions of ASCC, affirming the importance of this pillar in

²⁵ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Community Vision 2025*, ASEAN Secretariat (2015), <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf>.

shaping the context for Vietnamese cultural diplomacy.²⁶

C. Vietnam – ASEAN Cultural Diplomacy: Objectives and Orientations

With a profound awareness of the strategic role of cultural diplomacy and the importance of relations with ASEAN, Vietnam has set clear objectives and orientations for this activity.

Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN is oriented towards achieving multiple intertwined goals, serving both national interests and contributing to the region's overall development. These objectives can be summarized into the following key points:

Enhancing Understanding and Building Trust:
This is the fundamental and overarching objective. Through various cultural exchange and promotion activities, Vietnam aims to genuinely and vividly

²⁶ T. T. Y. Nguyen, *Ngoại giao văn hóa Việt Nam với ASEAN trong thời kỳ hội nhập* [Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN in the period of integration], Doctoral dissertation in Cultural Studies, Hanoi University of Culture (2016), at 26.

present its country, people, history, traditional and modern culture, thereby eliminating prejudices and misunderstandings and building mutual trust between the people of Vietnam and the people of other ASEAN countries.²⁷

Promoting National Image and Enhancing Status: Cultural diplomacy helps Vietnam build the image of a peaceful, stable, dynamic, culturally rich, and responsible nation in the region and globally. This not only attracts attention but also contributes to enhancing Vietnam's prestige and influence in regional and international forums.²⁸

Promoting Multi-sectoral Cooperation: Cultural diplomacy extends beyond the cultural sphere, laying the groundwork for economic, tourism, and

²⁷ H. Vu, Dấu ấn Việt Nam trong ASEAN: Đồng hành, lớn mạnh cùng năm tháng [Vietnam's imprint in ASEAN: Accompanying and growing with time]. *Tạp chí Cộng sản* (2023), <https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/web/guest/quoc-phong-an-ninh-oi-ngoai1/-/2018/828918/dau-an-viet-nam-trong-asean--dong-hanh%2C-lon-manh-cung-nam-thang.aspx>.

²⁸ T. M. H. Duong, Ngoại giao văn hóa góp phần thực hiện chính sách tích cực, chủ động hội nhập quốc tế. [Cultural diplomacy contributes to implementing an active and proactive international integration policy.], *Tạp chí điện tử Lý luận Chính trị* (2023), <https://lyluanchinhtri.vn/ngoi-giao-van-hoa-gop-phan-thuc-hien-chinh-sach-tich-cuc-chu-dong-hoi-nhap-quoc-te-81.html>.

educational cooperation. Cultural exchange helps create a favorable environment for investment, trade, student exchange, and scientific-technological cooperation. This objective is particularly important in the context of the developing ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).²⁹

Contributing to Building ASEAN Community Identity: As a responsible member, Vietnam actively participates in cultural cooperation initiatives and activities within the ASEAN framework, aiming to contribute to building a common identity and a sense of a cohesive, harmonious community that respects diversity. This is clearly demonstrated through Vietnam's active participation in ASCC programs and projects.

Preserving and Promoting National Cultural Values: Cultural diplomacy activities are also a way for Vietnam to re-evaluate its cultural values, while

²⁹ T. T. Y. Nguyen, *Ngoại giao văn hóa Việt Nam với ASEAN trong thời kỳ hội nhập* [Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN in the period of integration], Doctoral dissertation in Cultural Studies, Hanoi University of Culture (2016).

creating opportunities to learn and absorb the cultural essence of friendly countries, enriching the national culture.

The orientations for Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN are built upon the foreign policy guidelines of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the foreign policy of the State. Key orientations include:

Proactive and Active International and Regional Integration: Vietnam views integration as an inevitable process, in which cultural diplomacy plays a pioneering role. Vietnam is committed to deep participation in ASEAN activities at all levels, from high-level meetings to people-to-people exchanges.³⁰

Diversifying Forms and Contents of Cultural Diplomacy: Vietnam advocates for continuous innovation and creativity in cultural diplomacy activities, from large-scale events to grassroots exchanges, from traditional art forms to modern

³⁰ Communist Party of Vietnam, *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XIII, tập 1* [Documents of the 13th National Congress, Vol. 1], National Political Publishing House (2021).

cultural products. The content also needs to be rich, reflecting both historical depth and the dynamic development of Vietnamese culture.³¹

Emphasizing Promotion and Communication: In the digital age, applying modern information and communication technology to cultural diplomacy is essential. Vietnam is boosting its use of digital platforms and social media to reach a wide audience in ASEAN countries, enhancing the effectiveness of promoting the national image.

Strengthening Inter-agency Coordination: The effectiveness of cultural diplomacy requires close coordination among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, other ministries, local authorities, and the business sector and social organizations. This synergy helps optimize resources and create a combined strength for activities.

³¹ T. T. L. Do, Đường lối đối ngoại của Việt Nam trong thời kỳ đổi mới, hội nhập [Vietnam's foreign policy in the period of reform and integration], *Tạp chí Công thương* (2023), <https://tapchicongthuong.vn/duong-loi-doi-ngoai-cua-viet-nam-trong-thoi-ky-doi-moi--hoi-nhap-108280.htm>.

Developing High-Quality Human Resources: Training a contingent of cultural diplomacy officials with deep expertise, broad knowledge of regional and global cultures, strong foreign language skills, and international communication abilities is a crucial orientation for enhancing the capacity to implement activities.³²

Clearly Defining Target Publics: Cultural diplomacy needs to be tailored to specific publics in ASEAN countries, from elites, academics, and businesspeople to young generations and the general public, to maximize impact.

These solid theoretical foundations and clear policy orientations form an important basis for evaluating the practical implementation of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN, thereby identifying successes and limitations to derive valuable lessons learned.

³² T. T. Y. Nguyen, *Ngoại giao văn hóa Việt Nam với ASEAN trong thời kỳ hội nhập* [Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN in the period of integration], Doctoral dissertation in Cultural Studies, Hanoi University of Culture (2016), at 125-128.

III. PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF VIETNAM'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY WITH ASEAN

Cultural diplomacy is a vital pillar in Vietnam's foreign policy, especially in the context of deep integration into the ASEAN Community. With the diversity and richness of its national culture, Vietnam has actively implemented various activities to foster exchange, promote the country's image and people, and contribute to building a cohesive ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). This section will delve into typical activities, assess achievements, and identify remaining limitations and challenges.

A. Typical Activities and Achievements

Vietnam has implemented a broad spectrum of cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN, from state-level to people-to-people levels, demonstrating diversity in methods and content. These activities aim not only to introduce Vietnamese culture but also to serve as a bridge for absorbing regional and global

cultural essence, consolidating trust and mutual understanding.

1. Artistic Exchanges: Music Festivals, Art Performances

Artistic exchange is one of the most traditional and effective forms of cultural diplomacy, helping to spread emotions and messages across language barriers. Vietnam regularly sends art troupes to participate in regional and international festivals organized by ASEAN or its member states, while also hosting many major events. Traditional art performances such as *ca tru*, *quan họ* (ca trù, quan họ), water puppetry, along with contemporary acts, have left a deep impression on the ASEAN public. For example, the ASEAN Traditional Music Festival in 2015 and 2022 are typical examples.³³ These events brought together artists and unique musical

³³ H. Duc, Liên hoan Âm nhạc ASEAN 2022: Đoàn kết, sáng tạo - cùng nhau tỏa sáng [ASEAN Music Festival 2022: Unity, creativity - shining together], *Cổng thông tin điện tử Bộ Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch* (2022), <https://bvhttdl.gov.vn/lien-hoan-am-nhac-asean-2022-doan-ket-sang-tao-cung-nhau-toa-sang-20221220150704168.htm>.

forms from across member states, providing opportunities for the regional public to enjoy and understand the richness of ASEAN's musical heritage, including Vietnam's.

Furthermore, Vietnam also actively organizes performances and tours by ASEAN artists in Vietnam, thereby enhancing exchange and mutual learning. These activities are not merely performances but also channels for exchanging experiences, enabling artists to cooperate and create together, contributing to enriching the regional cultural identity. The impact of artistic exchange activities is often direct, creating strong personal experiences and helping to build immediate goodwill. They also help reinforce Vietnam's image as a culturally rich, diverse, and welcoming nation.

2. Cultural Exhibitions: Introducing Heritage, Customs, and Practices

Cultural exhibitions are effective means to visually and deeply introduce Vietnam's tangible and intangible heritage, customs, history, and art to the

ASEAN public. Vietnam regularly participates in exhibitions organized by ASEAN or hosts large-scale events itself. Typical examples include the “ASEAN Cultural Space” Exhibition in Vietnam in 2014, and the ASEAN cultural space at the opening ceremony of AARM-30.³⁴ These exhibitions displayed artifacts, images, traditional costumes, and characteristic cultural features of ASEAN countries, creating an interactive space that helped Vietnamese people and international tourists gain a more comprehensive view of the bloc's cultural diversity.

Additionally, specialized exhibitions on Vietnam's world heritage sites (such as Ha Long Bay, Hoi An Ancient Town, Hue Imperial Citadel Complex), traditional handicrafts, and photographs about the country and people of Vietnam are also regularly organized in ASEAN countries. These activities not only promote culture but also stimulate

³⁴ H. Duc, Liên hoan Âm nhạc ASEAN 2022: Đoàn kết, sáng tạo - cùng nhau tỏa sáng [ASEAN Music Festival 2022: Unity, creativity - shining together], *Công thông tin điện tử Bộ Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch* (2022), <https://bvhttdl.gov.vn/lien-hoan-am-nhac-asean-2022-doan-ket-sang-tao-cung-nhau-toa-sang-20221220150704168.htm>.

curiosity, boost tourism, and create opportunities for partners to learn more about potential cooperation with Vietnam. Exhibitions help convey complex messages visually, strongly impacting public perception.

3. Culinary Diplomacy: Food Festivals

Cuisine is one of the most accessible and globally appealing cultural elements, playing a crucial role in image building and people-to-people connections. Vietnam has actively leveraged the “soft power” of its cuisine in cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN. Food festivals and Vietnamese food weeks in ASEAN countries and vice versa have been regularly organized. The ASEAN Community Food Festival with International Friends in 2015 and the International Food Festival in 2024 are vivid examples. Here, characteristic Vietnamese dishes such as *pho*, *nem*, *bun cha*, etc., not only satisfy the palates of the public but also tell stories about Vietnamese culture, history, and people.

Culinary diplomacy is not just about introducing dishes; it is also an expression of hospitality, cultural sophistication, and lifestyle. It creates a friendly, relaxed space for people to interact and learn about each other, thereby fostering understanding and goodwill. In the context of integration, cuisine can also become a cultural industry, contributing to economic development and tourism.

4. Educational and Training Exchanges: Student, Lecturer Exchanges, Research Cooperation

Educational and training exchange is a strategic cultural diplomacy channel, with long-term impacts on the perceptions of future generations. Vietnam and ASEAN countries have actively promoted student, lecturer, and scholar exchange programs, as well as cooperation in scientific research. Bilateral and multilateral scholarship programs (e.g., ASEAN scholarships, scholarships from member states to each other) have enabled thousands of Vietnamese

and ASEAN students and researchers to study and learn about each other.

The presence of Vietnamese students and lecturers at ASEAN universities and vice versa not only helps develop individual capacities but also directly contributes to promoting culture, lifestyle, and people. They become unofficial “cultural ambassadors,” helping to break down language and cultural barriers. Joint research on regional issues (climate change, energy security, sustainable development, etc.) also enhances understanding and builds knowledge networks, contributing to the overall development of ASEAN.³⁵

5. Heritage Conservation Cooperation: Multilateral Cooperation Programs in the Region

ASEAN is a region rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Heritage conservation cooperation is an important area of cultural diplomacy,

³⁵ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Community Vision 2025*, ASEAN Secretariat (2015), <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/aec-page/ASEAN-Community-Vision-2025.pdf>.

demonstrating the shared responsibility of nations in preserving cultural values for future generations. Vietnam has actively participated in multilateral cooperation programs within the ASEAN framework to conserve common or related cultural heritage. For example, initiatives on world heritage preservation and intangible heritage recognized by UNESCO often receive close cooperation among countries.

These activities include sharing experiences on conservation techniques, training human resources, and organizing international scientific workshops. Jointly protecting cultural values not only strengthens relations between nations but also raises community awareness of the importance of heritage. Heritage conservation cooperation demonstrates cultural harmony and the shared commitment of ASEAN members, creating a solid foundation for building the bloc's common identity.

6. People-to-People Diplomacy: Youth Exchange Programs, Non-governmental Cultural Initiatives

People-to-people diplomacy, especially youth exchange programs, is a strategic cultural diplomacy channel aimed at building a solid foundation for long-term relations. Vietnam actively participates in and organizes Vietnam–ASEAN youth exchange programs, youth forums, cultural summer camps, etc. These activities provide opportunities for young people from different countries to meet, learn about each other, and form friendships and understanding early on. They are the ones who will inherit and develop relations between nations in the future.

In addition, non-governmental cultural organizations (NGOs) and friendship associations are playing an increasingly important role in promoting people-to-people cultural exchange. These activities are often flexible and reach a wider audience than official diplomacy, contributing to building strong network linkages between communities in the region. People-to-people

diplomacy helps create emotional connections and intellectual alignment, a key factor for sustainable understanding.³⁶

B. Assessment of Advantages

Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN during the period of integration have achieved remarkable results, evident through the following prominent advantages:

1. Contributing to Mutual Understanding and Building a Friendly, Dynamic Image of Vietnam

This is the most evident advantage. Through the diversity of exchange and promotional activities, the public in ASEAN countries has had the opportunity to access a more authentic and multi-dimensional understanding of Vietnam's land, people, history, culture, and development. Prejudices or misinformation have gradually been dispelled,

³⁶ H. N. Tuch, *COMMUNICATING WITH THE WORLD: US PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OVERSEAS* (1990).

replaced by the image of a peaceful, friendly, hospitable Vietnam, rich in cultural identity and dynamically developing. Cultural events provide a platform for people from ASEAN countries to directly experience the richness of Vietnamese cuisine, the sophistication of traditional art, and the creativity of contemporary Vietnamese culture. This is particularly important in building Vietnam's "attractiveness" in the region.

2. Enhancing Vietnam's Position in the Region and Internationally

Vietnam's proactive participation in and organization of major cultural events within the ASEAN framework, as well as its active contributions to ASCC's common initiatives, have helped to elevate the country's position and prestige. This demonstrates Vietnam's role as a responsible, proactive, and capable leader in non-traditional cooperation areas. The success of events hosted by Vietnam has affirmed Vietnam's organizational and management capabilities and its influence in the

region. This is a crucial factor in implementing Vietnam's independent, self-reliant, multilateralized, and diversified foreign policy.

3. Promoting Tourism, Investment, and Economic Exchange

Although not the sole direct objective, cultural diplomacy has generated positive effects on economic development. When Vietnam's cultural image is widely promoted, tourists from ASEAN and international countries tend to want to explore the country and experience its culture, thereby boosting the tourism industry. The increase in tourists leads to the development of service and trade sectors. Additionally, cultural understanding and goodwill can create a more favorable environment for investment and trade activities. Businesses and investors often tend to collaborate with partners they understand and trust, and culture is one of the factors that build this trust. Cultural diplomacy thus becomes a “soft impetus” for economic relations.

C. Limitations and Challenges

Despite achieving significant advantages, Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN still face numerous limitations and challenges, requiring synchronized solutions and long-term strategies.

1. Limited Resources (Financial, Human)

One of the biggest barriers to implementing large-scale and effective cultural diplomacy is resources. Financial resources allocated for cultural diplomacy activities are often not commensurate with the potential and stated objectives. This leads to many programs remaining small in scale, having limited widespread impact, or lacking continuity. Furthermore, the specialized human resources for cultural diplomacy are still insufficient and weak. Many leaders and managers at various levels, despite possessing numerous degrees and certificates, have only “standardized” their positions formally; the application of knowledge and skills in practice

regarding expertise, professional skills, foreign languages, informatics, and the skills to confidently work independently in an international environment are very modest.³⁷ The shortage of high-quality human resources affects strategic planning, professional event organization, and effectiveness assessment. This is a common challenge faced by many developing countries when investing in the field of soft power.³⁸

2. Ineffective and Lacking Innovation in Promotion

Although Vietnam has many cultural diplomacy activities, the promotion and communication for these activities are not truly strong and innovative. Information about events often remains limited in scope, failing to reach a wide international and regional audience. The application of digital

³⁷ T. M. T. Tran, *Xây Dựng Đội Ngũ Cán Bộ Có Năng Lực Làm Việc Trong Môi Trường Quốc Tế [Building A Team Of Cadres Capable Of Working In An International Environment]*, 544 TẠP CHÍ LÝ LUẬN CHÍNH TRỊ 84 (2023).

³⁸ J. Melissen, *THE NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: SOFT POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS* (2005).

technology and social media to disseminate cultural messages has not been fully exploited and lacks professionalism. Many activities are still formalistic, failing to create breakthroughs or unique imprints. The method of conveying content is sometimes stereotypical, failing to demonstrate the creativity and uniqueness of Vietnamese culture in an attractive way to the modern audience. The lack of cultural products that can quickly spread on digital platforms is an example.³⁹

3. Lack of Synchronized Coordination Among Ministries, Sectors, and Localities

Cultural diplomacy activities often involve multiple ministries (Foreign Affairs, Culture - Sports - Tourism, Education - Training, Information - Communications) and localities. However,

³⁹ S. P. Tran, Phát huy sức mạnh mềm văn hóa Việt Nam theo tinh thần Đại hội XIII của Đảng [Promoting Vietnam's cultural soft power in the spirit of the Party's 13th Congress], *Tạp chí Cộng sản* (2022), https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/media-story/-/asset_publisher/V8hhp4dK31Gf/content/phat-huy-suc-manh-mem-van-hoa-viet-nam-theo-tinh-than-dai-hoi-xiii-cua-dang.

coordination among these agencies is sometimes not synchronized, leading to overlapping functions, duplication of activities, or neglecting important areas. The lack of an effective, high-level coordination mechanism can reduce the overall effectiveness of cultural diplomacy programs. This leads to a waste of resources and slows down the implementation of strategic initiatives. The role of the private sector and social organizations has also not been fully promoted in participating in these activities.

4. Difficulties in Accessing and Impacting Diverse ASEAN Audiences

ASEAN is an incredibly diverse region in terms of culture, religion, language, and development levels. Designing cultural diplomacy messages and activities that are appropriate and effectively impact different target audiences in member countries is a major challenge. The cultural needs and tastes of people in Indonesia differ from those in Singapore, and those in the Philippines differ from those in Laos.

The lack of in-depth research on target audiences sometimes leads to “one-way” activities that do not truly “touch” the hearts and minds of local people. The ability to adapt and localize cultural content to create resonance is still limited.

5. Cultural Competition in the Region

Although ASEAN aims for solidarity, there is still a certain degree of cultural competition among member states in promoting their image and attracting international attention. Countries like Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, with their economic potential and long-standing experience in cultural diplomacy, often have more systematic strategies and abundant resources. This requires Vietnam to constantly innovate, find its unique, distinctive, and competitive advantages to create its own mark on the regional cultural map. The absence of a strong and consistent “cultural brand” can reduce the ability of international audiences to be attracted to and remember Vietnamese culture.

The practical implementation of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN has achieved certain successes in enhancing understanding, raising its position, and promoting cooperation. However, limitations in resources, professionalism in promotion, coordination, and the ability to adapt to diverse audiences are issues that need to be addressed strategically for Vietnam's cultural diplomacy to truly unleash its full potential.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN has highlighted significant achievements while also pointing out limitations and challenges. From the accumulated experience during the process of integration and development, Vietnam needs to draw profound lessons and propose specific policy recommendations to optimize the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy activities in the future. This is a crucial step to transition from current theory and practice to a more effective and sustainable cultural diplomacy strategy.

A. Lessons Learned

Years of implementing cultural diplomacy with ASEAN have provided Vietnam with valuable lessons, contributing to shaping the development path of this field:

1. The Importance of Building Clear, Long-Term Strategies

The first and overarching lesson is the necessity of a clear, long-term national cultural diplomacy strategy. Although Vietnam has policy orientations, the lack of a comprehensive, detailed strategy, concretized by specific action plans for each period and each partner (in this case, ASEAN), can lead to fragmented activities, lack of focus, and failure to unleash synergistic power. The strategy needs to clearly define objectives, target audiences, core messages, resources, and effectiveness assessment mechanisms. As Nye pointed out, leveraging soft power requires a calculated strategy and cannot rely

solely on spontaneity.⁴⁰ A long-term strategy helps stakeholders share the same direction, avoid overlaps, and optimize resources.

2. The Necessity of Diversifying Forms and Content of Activities

Practice shows that traditional cultural diplomacy activities such as artistic performances and exhibitions, while still valuable, need to be innovated and diversified to suit modern tastes and contexts. Vietnamese culture is rich, but the promotion methods need to be more creative to avoid monotony and attract the attention of different audiences, especially young people. The lesson learned is to constantly explore new forms (such as culinary diplomacy, sports, cinema, fashion, games, etc.) and ensure that content is highly interactive and connects with global and regional issues. Focusing on unique, universally humane cultural values while incorporating contemporary elements will help

⁴⁰ J. S. Nye, Jr., *SOFT POWER: THE MEANS TO SUCCESS IN WORLD POLITICS* (2004).

Vietnamese cultural messages be more easily received and disseminated. This is a vital factor in overcoming cultural competition in the region.

3. The Role of Technology and Digital Media in Modern Cultural Diplomacy

In the era of the 4.0 industrial revolution, digital technology and social media have completely changed how people interact and receive information. The clear lesson is that without maximizing the use of digital platforms, cultural diplomacy activities will struggle to reach a wide audience, especially the younger generation. From using social media to promote events, live-streaming performances, to building digital heritage platforms, applying virtual reality (VR) or artificial intelligence (AI) to experience culture—all are powerful tools to enhance interaction and disseminate cultural messages quickly, widely, and cost-effectively.⁴¹

⁴¹ P. Y. N. Nguyen, Truyền thông và văn hóa trong kỷ nguyên số tại Việt Nam [Communication and culture in the digital age in Vietnam], *Tạp chí Việt Nam hội nhập* (2025), <https://vietnamhoinhap.vn/vi/truyen-thong-va-van-hoa-trong-ky-nguyen-so-tai-viet-nam-51361.htm>.

Resources for digital media need to be prioritized and invested systematically.

4. Encouraging Whole-of-Society Participation, Especially the Private Sector and the Public

Cultural diplomacy is not just the responsibility of the state but of the entire society. Lessons from practice show that with the active participation of the private sector (cultural, tourism, media enterprises), civil society organizations, Vietnamese communities abroad, and the general public, cultural diplomacy activities become much richer, more diverse, and more effective. The private sector brings dynamism, creativity, and financial resources, while the public and overseas Vietnamese communities are natural “cultural ambassadors,” conveying messages authentically and reliably. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) in this field need to be strongly promoted.

5. Training and Developing High-Quality Human Resources for Cultural Diplomacy

The effectiveness of cultural diplomacy largely depends on the quality of the staff and experts involved. The lesson has shown that the shortage of human resources with in-depth knowledge of culture, diplomatic skills, foreign language proficiency, and understanding of the regional context is a major limitation. There is a need for specialized, interdisciplinary training programs to equip this workforce with the necessary knowledge and skills to plan, implement, and evaluate cultural diplomacy campaigns professionally. This includes enhancing the capacity of media teams and digital content creators for cultural diplomacy.⁴²

⁴² D. H. Vu, *Ngoại giao và công tác ngoại giao* [Diplomacy and diplomatic work], National Political Truth Publishing House (2009).

6. Flexibility and Adaptability to Regional and International Contexts

The ASEAN and international contexts are constantly changing, with new opportunities and emerging challenges (such as pandemics, climate change, geopolitical tensions). The lesson is that cultural diplomacy cannot be rigid according to a fixed template but needs high flexibility and quick adaptability to the situation. This requires the ability to analyze, forecast trends, and adjust priorities and forms of activity in a timely manner. The ability to “respond quickly” to media crises or leverage current events to promote culture is also an important aspect of this flexibility.

B. Policy Recommendations

Based on the lessons learned and to address the identified limitations, the following are specific policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN:

1. Increase Investment and Mobilize Resources for Cultural Diplomacy

For cultural diplomacy to truly become a strategic tool, there needs to be adequate financial investment from the state budget, while also stepping up the mobilization of other resources from the private sector, international organizations, and overseas Vietnamese communities. Mechanisms to encourage and incentivize businesses and philanthropists to invest in cultural projects of national and regional scale are needed. Establishing a dedicated fund for cultural diplomacy or increasing budgets for cultural diplomacy agencies is essential. Resources are not just money but also facilities, technology, and people, which need to be allocated reasonably, transparently, and effectively.

2. Improve Institutions and Coordination Mechanisms Among Relevant Agencies

To overcome overlapping and lack of synchronization, it is necessary to improve the legal

framework and inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Consideration should be given to establishing a high-level coordinating body with sufficient authority to direct, manage, and supervise all national cultural diplomacy activities, or at least strengthening the role of a lead agency (e.g., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism) with close participation from other ministries and localities. This mechanism needs to clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and powers of each party, building clear coordination procedures to avoid a “do-it-yourself” situation.

3. Promote the Application of Digital Technology in Promoting Vietnamese Culture to the World

This is a breakthrough and urgent recommendation. Vietnam needs to build a comprehensive digital cultural diplomacy strategy, clearly identifying priority digital platforms (social media, specialized websites, mobile applications, streaming platforms...), digitized content (3D

images, 360-degree videos, virtual reality), and target audiences. Investment is needed in producing high-quality digital cultural products with strong viral potential on international platforms, creating new interactions and experiences for viewers. Collaborating with major technology corporations to develop cultural applications, games, or digital media channels about Vietnam is also a promising direction.

4. Develop Breakthrough, Effective Cultural Diplomacy Programs and Projects Targeting Specific Audiences

Instead of scattered activities, resources should be focused on developing strategic, in-depth cultural diplomacy programs and projects that create a unique impression and target specific audiences. For example:

For ASEAN youth: Develop attractive cultural exchange programs, scholarships, summer camps, and competitions about Vietnamese culture designed

to appeal to young people (using technology, modern music, game shows...).

For elites, scholars, and businesses: Organize specialized forums on Vietnamese culture, economy, and society, scientific conferences, roundtables, inviting leading experts and scholars to participate to create a deeper impact.

For overseas Vietnamese communities: Promote the role of overseas Vietnamese communities as bridges in promoting Vietnamese culture in their host countries through support and training activities.]

Create a “brand” for cultural diplomacy: Build one or several iconic cultural events, organized annually, with international reach, becoming a cultural “rendezvous” for Vietnam and ASEAN.

5. Focus on Scientific Research and Evaluation of Cultural Diplomacy Activities

To ensure that cultural diplomacy activities are not merely formalistic but truly effective, a scientific and regular research and evaluation system needs to

be established. This includes: (1) In-depth research on the tastes and psychology of target audiences in ASEAN countries; (2) Developing a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) for each activity, from reach and interaction levels to changes in perception and goodwill; (3) Conducting quantitative and qualitative surveys and analyses after each program to draw specific lessons and adjust strategies promptly. Effectiveness evaluation helps ensure that resources are optimally utilized and activities achieve their stated objectives.

These lessons learned and policy recommendations are the foundation for Vietnam to continue developing cultural diplomacy with ASEAN in a sustainable and effective manner, contributing to strengthening regional relations, enhancing national prestige, and building a cohesive and prosperous ASEAN Community.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has provided a comprehensive analysis of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy with

ASEAN, from theoretical foundations to practical implementation, while also drawing lessons learned and proposing policy recommendations. It is clear that cultural diplomacy is not just an aspect but has become an indispensable pillar of Vietnam's foreign policy, especially in the context of deep integration into the ASEAN Community. Diverse activities, from artistic exchanges, cultural exhibitions, and culinary diplomacy to educational exchanges and heritage preservation cooperation, have significantly contributed to enhancing mutual understanding, building a friendly and dynamic image of Vietnam, and elevating the nation's position in the region.

However, despite notable achievements, Vietnam's cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN still face many limitations, such as limited financial and human resources, ineffective promotion, uncoordinated efforts, and difficulties in reaching diverse audiences. These challenges require Vietnam to continuously innovate and refine its strategy.

With its rich cultural potential and increasing role in ASEAN, Vietnam-ASEAN cultural diplomacy

will continue to assert its strategic importance. In the future, trends such as the application of digital technology, message personalization, and the promotion of whole-of-society participation will reshape how Vietnam conducts cultural diplomacy. Vietnam has full potential to develop cultural diplomacy to a new level, effectively contributing to building a cohesive, sustainable, and prosperous ASEAN Community, while also enhancing its attractiveness and influence on the international stage.