



From Ideology to heritage: Identifying the value of Tran Nhan Tong's ideology in contemporary cultural life

Vo Vuong Quoc

Thanh Hoa University of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Vietnam

Abstract

Previous studies on Tran Nhan Tong have primarily approached him from the perspective of intellectual history, philosophy, and Buddhism. While this approach is significant in establishing his position in the nation's intellectual history, it has not fully explained the vitality of his values in contemporary cultural life. In reality, Tran Nhan Tong's thought exists not only in texts or academic discourse but is also embodied in festivals, rituals, pilgrimages, religious activities, traditional education, cultural media, and spiritual tourism. From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, this article clarifies the transformation process from thought to heritage as these values are received, practiced, and recreated by the community. Through this, the article identifies core values and analyzes their presence in the contemporary Truc Lam cultural space.

Keywords: Tran nhan tong, intellectual values, intellectual heritage, intangible cultural heritage, contemporary cultural life

Introduction

In Vietnamese scholarship, Tran Nhan Tong has long been recognized as a figure of special importance in national history: both a wise king who made great contributions to the defense of the country, and a philosopher and founder of the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen school. The works of Nguyen Tai Thu, Nguyen Lang, Le Manh That, Tran Van Giau, Thich Thanh Tu, and many other scholars have contributed to clarifying his position in the history of Vietnamese thought, while also summarizing the core values of the Truc Lam ideology such as living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma, the spirit of engagement with the world, harmony between religion and life, and between personal cultivation and social responsibility (Nguyen Tai Thu, 2019, pp. 25-40; Nguyen Lang, 2012, pp. 302-305; Le Manh That, 2020, pp. 112-118) [4, 5]. The author's thesis also points out that most existing works primarily approach Tran Nhan Tong as a historical, religious, or philosophical ideology, while the consideration of this ideology as a cultural entity operating in contemporary life remains limited.

This gap becomes clearer when placing Tran Nhan Tong in the current context. In Vietnam, many cultural and spiritual spaces associated with Truc Lam are being heavily invested in, restored, and exploited in relation to festivals, media, and tourism. In this context, the ideological values of Tran Nhan Tong are not only reiterated in academic research but are also present in specific cultural practices: in the Yen Tu and Tay Yen Tu spaces, in pilgrimages, rituals, Buddhist activities, cultural discourse, and spiritual tourism products. This thesis emphasizes that, according to the intangible cultural heritage approach, ideological value systems do not exist independently, but are always linked to the community, to practices, and to the continuous transmission process between generations. Therefore, the object to be identified is not "ideology" in the abstract sense, but "ideological values" that have entered cultural life, been received and recreated by the community (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 2-3; Smith & Akagawa, 2008, pp. 33-34) [8, 11].

From this, the article raises the question: how does an ideology transform into heritage? And in the case of Tran Nhan Tong, what values continue to be present as living

elements in contemporary cultural life? Answering this question will not only broaden the understanding of intangible cultural heritage, but also contribute to correctly identifying the role of spiritual values in the current Vietnamese cultural structure. This is also the approach that the thesis has established when viewing "Tran Nhan Tong's intellectual legacy" as a research object with a multi-layered structure, encompassing value content, transmission forms, and social practices.

Theoretical Basis and Research Approach

1. From Ideology to Heritage: A Cognitive Shift

In the social sciences and humanities, "ideology" is often understood as a system of views, concepts, and ideals formed at a high level of generalization, capable of guiding human perception and action. However, not every idea becomes a heritage. An ideology can only transform into a heritage when it transcends the realm of individual historical pronouncements to be accepted, repeated, reinterpreted, and maintained by the community as a source of living values. According to this thesis, this is the point to distinguish between "ideology" and "ideological values" and "ideological heritage": ideology is the starting point of a system of concepts; ideological values are the part that has been chosen and acknowledged by society; and ideological heritage is the enduring state of existence of that value system when it has entered cultural practice and still has the capacity to guide the present.

This understanding is consistent with modern intangible cultural heritage theory. The 2003 UNESCO Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills recognized by communities, groups, and in some cases individuals as part of their cultural heritage; and these elements are constantly recreated by the community in interaction with their living environment and history (UNESCO, 2003, pp. 2-3) [11]. In international academia, Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa also emphasize that heritage value is not an inherent fixed attribute, but is constructed in discourse, practice, and social recognition (Smith, 2006; Smith & Akagawa, 2008, pp. 33-34) [7, 8]. The thesis directly applies this spirit by arguing that

the object of study is not thought as an abstract content, but rather the ideological values that have been embodied in cultural life and continue to be passed down by the community.

2. Intellectual Heritage as a Working Cultural Entity

A valuable academic argument in the thesis is the critique of the tendency to view Tran Nhan Tong's thought only as "philosophical content" or "Buddhist objects," while failing to fully recognize it as a "working cultural entity" in contemporary life. This observation is crucial because, if the study stops at the level of intellectual history, the researcher can only describe the context of its formation and the content of the ideology; but if it shifts to the level of heritage, the focus of the study will change to: what values are being received by the community, in what forms are they embodied, and how are they impacting contemporary cultural life? In other words, "ideological heritage" is not a decorative concept, but a theoretical operation aimed at clarifying the current social state of a historical value system.

3. The Approach of the Article

This article directly inherits the above approach to identify the ideological values of Tran Nhan Tong in contemporary cultural life. Accordingly, the focus is not on analyzing the entire system of Truc Lam doctrines, nor on delving into textual studies, but on three levels: (1) the core value system of Tran Nhan Tong's thought; (2) the cultural forms that are transmitting those values; and (3) the socio-cultural environment where those values continue to be received, practiced, and reproduced. This approach also corresponds to the research structure that the thesis has established for the object of "Tran Nhan Tong's ideological heritage".

Core values in the thought of Tran Nhan Tong

1. Living in the world and finding joy in the spiritual path: from the concept of asceticism to a philosophy of life.

In the ideology of Tran Nhan Tong, "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma" is one of the most prominent values. Essentially, this is not only a guiding principle of the Truc Lam Zen sect, but also a philosophy of life with broader cultural implications: people can live in the world, participate in worldly affairs, but still maintain their spiritual life and moral foundation. Nguyen Lang argues that this is one of the characteristics that makes Truc Lam Zen unique in its Vietnamese identity, because it does not absolutize renunciation of the world but places the Dharma in relation to life (Nguyen Lang, 2012, pp. 302-305)^[4]. The thesis also emphasizes that this value continues to be vibrant in the present because it allows for a connection between spiritual needs and social responsibility, between inner cultivation and behavior within the community.

2. Harmony and harmony: the standard of cultural integration.

Associated with the concept of "living in the world while upholding the Dharma" is the idea of "harmonizing with the world." While "living in the world while upholding the Dharma" emphasizes the ability to live amidst the world while maintaining one's spiritual path, "harmonizing with the world" emphasizes the capacity to integrate into the community, reduce ego, and behave humbly in social life.

On a cultural level, this is a value of very broad significance: it guides people towards harmony, dialogue, softening conflicts, and building communities on a foundation of empathy. In the context of contemporary society, where spiritual life faces many pressures of competition and differentiation, this value still retains its significance as a profound principle of cultural conduct. This thesis considers this one of the values that has the potential to continue to be re-emerged in contemporary cultural and religious life, especially in the context associated with the Truc Lam Zen sect.

3. Engagement with the world and social responsibility

A crucial characteristic of Tran Nhan Tong's thought is his spirit of engagement with the world. His life is the clearest evidence of this: from a king leading the resistance against the Yuan-Mongol invaders, he became a Buddhist monk but did not detach himself from the fate of the country and the community. According to this thesis, this spirit of engagement prevents Tran Nhan Tong's thought from falling into a rejection of social life, but rather guides people towards responsible participation based on morality and intellect. This value is particularly important in today's context, when society needs value models capable of connecting individual morality with civic and community responsibility.

4. National consciousness and moral-humanistic depth

The thesis also identifies a very important layer of values in Tran Nhan Tong's thought, linked to national consciousness, the spirit of independence, and profound moral and humanistic depth. As the king of Dai Viet, he could not be separated from the experience of nation-building and national defense; therefore, the value system he left behind always bears a Vietnamese character, combining Buddhism with national cultural identity. At the same time, values such as compassion, tolerance, benevolence, and a sense of responsibility to the community also create the moral depth of this ideology. According to the thesis, it is this layer of values that makes Tran Nhan Tong remembered not only as a religious figure, but also as a national cultural symbol capable of continuing to influence contemporary life.

Identifying the ideological values of Tran Nhan Tong in contemporary cultural life

1. Truc Lam cultural space serves as a repository for valuable memories.

According to the thesis, the intellectual legacy of Tran Nhan Tong should not be recognized as an abstract value system detached from practical life, but rather placed within specific cultural spaces where that ideology is preserved, interpreted, and re-implemented. In current practice, the two spaces most directly and prominently related to Tran Nhan Tong's intellectual legacy are Yen Tu and Tay Yen Tu. If Yen Tu is the center where historical memory, religious practice, and the symbolism of Truc Lam Buddhism are crystallized, then Tay Yen Tu is an expanded space where the imprint of Truc Lam is extended through pilgrimage routes, temple and pagoda systems, and contemporary cultural and tourism products. The space here is not just a geographical location, but a cultural environment where the community maintains memory and values.

2. Festivals, rituals, and religious activities

Another prominent aspect is the re-enactment of Tran Nhan Tong's ideological values through Buddhist festivals, rituals,

and activities. In activities associated with Yen Tu and Truc Lam, Tran Nhan Tong's image appears not only as a historical figure but also as a spiritual symbol. Through rituals, pilgrimages, festivals, and religious practices, values such as virtuous conduct, purity, engagement with the world, harmony, and self-cultivation are recalled, interpreted, and transmitted to the community. This is the mechanism that prevents the ideology from being "frozen" in texts, allowing it to continue operating as a living value. According to the thesis, in the current Vietnamese context, ideological values can only be maintained and recreated when linked to specific cultural and religious spaces where rituals, community activities, and traditional education take place.

3. Education, media, and cultural discourse

The ideological values of Tran Nhan Tong are still conveyed today through education and cultural communication. In popular educational products, destination guides, exhibitions, heritage interpretations, and cultural experience programs, concepts such as "Buddha Emperor," "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma," "Truc Lam," and "harmony with the world" are used as cultural codes to introduce a system of moral and spiritual values. However, the thesis also notes that the widespread presence of these symbols does not necessarily mean that the ideological content is always fully conveyed. The academic challenge is to distinguish between a value being reiterated as a symbol and its understanding as a deeper value structure. Therefore, identifying ideological values in contemporary life requires not only looking at the frequency of the symbol's appearance, but also at the capacity for interpretation and the extent to which the community truly accepts and practices that value.

4. Spiritual tourism and the popularization of intellectual heritage

In the contemporary context, cultural and spiritual tourism is a powerful channel for bringing the intellectual legacy of Tran Nhan Tong to a wider audience. Visitors to Yen Tu or Tay Yen Tu are not merely seeking a scenic spot or beautiful landscape, but also a symbolic space associated with a journey of asceticism, enlightenment, and a unique philosophy of life. On the positive side, tourism has contributed to the popularization of values that were previously primarily confined to academic or religious spaces. However, as this thesis analyzes, focusing only on the surface manifestations without deeper interpretation can reduce intellectual values to mere slogans and symbols. Therefore, the presence of Tran Nhan Tong's thought in contemporary cultural life is always dualistic: it serves as evidence of the vitality of the heritage while simultaneously requiring a deeper understanding of the connection between imagery and the intrinsic value.

Discussion

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the transformation from ideology to heritage is not a simple "transformation," but a complex socio-cultural process. An ideology only truly becomes heritage when it is communalized, embodied in practice, and reinterpreted across various historical contexts. The case of Tran Nhan Tong clearly demonstrates this mechanism: his values do not live on simply because they are recorded in historical texts or writings, but because they continue to be recognized

by the community as meaningful norms for the present. This is what gives a spiritual heritage its enduring vitality. However, it is also necessary to emphasize that this vitality does not equate to absolute integrity. When an ideology enters festivals, media, education, or tourism, it is always restructured to suit new contexts. Therefore, the study of intellectual heritage cannot simply affirm its value, but must also examine how that value is interpreted, simplified, emphasized, or transformed in contemporary life. The thesis correctly points out that without viewing thought as a functioning cultural entity, researchers will find it difficult to accurately assess its role and transformation in the present.

Conclusions

From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, the thought of Tran Nhan Tong can be identified as a form of living spiritual heritage in contemporary cultural life. The transformation from thought to heritage occurs when this value system transcends the realm of individual history, is embraced by the community, and manifests itself in cultural spaces, festivals, rituals, religious activities, education, media, and spiritual tourism. Values such as "living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma," "harmonizing with the world," "engagement with the world," national consciousness, and moral and humanistic depth continue to be present as spiritual resources capable of guiding life today. Therefore, studying Tran Nhan Tong is not only about returning to the past, but also about identifying a layer of values that continues to thrive in modern culture. Viewed from this perspective, "ideological heritage" is not an auxiliary concept, but rather a theoretical suggestion capable of expanding the scope of cultural heritage research and providing a deeper understanding of the role of spiritual values in contemporary Vietnamese cultural identity.

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