FROM AGENTS TO SUBJECTS: HERITAGE, POWER, AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF BEARER COMMUNITY

Nguyen Thi Hien *

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex relationship between heritage, power, and the role of communities in heritage practices in contemporary Vietnam through three case studies: the Worship of the Hùng Kings, the Practices Related to Việt Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of the Three Realms, and Đường Lâm Ancient Village. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) and theories of heritage politics from below, the paper examines how heritage is not only understood as a discourse but also as a space for power negotiation between the state and communities. Combining fieldwork and discourse analysis, the study reveals that despite official rhetoric positioning communities as "heritage bearers," they are often excluded from decision-making processes and relegated to symbolic or performative roles. The paper argues for a reconfiguration of heritage governance towards a co-creative model that prioritizes dialogue and equitable power-sharing among stakeholders.

Keywords: *heritage; power; community; Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD); heritage politics from below.*

TỪ CHỦ THỂ THÀNH ĐỐI TƯỢNG: DI SẢN, QUYỀN LỰC VÀ NGOÀI LỀ HÓA CỘNG ĐỒNG

Nguyễn Thị Hiền *

TÓM TẮT

Bài báo này phân tích mối quan hệ giữa di sản, quyền lực và vai trò của cộng đồng trong thực hành di sản tại Việt Nam thông qua ba trường hợp điển cứu: tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương, thực hành thờ Mẫu Tam phủ của người Việt, và làng cổ Đường Lâm. Vận dụng khung lý thuyết diễn ngôn di sản được ủy quyền (AHD) và chính trị di sản từ dưới lên, bài viết làm rõ cách thức di sản không chỉ được hiểu như một diễn ngôn, mà còn là không gian đàm phán quyền lực giữa nhà nước và cộng đồng. Kết hợp nghiên cứu thực địa và phân tích diễn ngôn, nghiên cứu cho thấy rằng cộng đồng thường được coi là "chủ thể di sản", nhưng trên thực tế họ thường bị loại khỏi các quá trình ra quyết định và chỉ là những đối tượng được "mời tham gia" một cách hình thức. Bài báo lập luận cho việc tái cấu trúc mô hình quản trị di sản theo hướng đồng sáng tạo ưu tiên đối thoại và chia sẻ quyền lực giữa các bên liên quan.

Từ khóa: *Di sản; quyền lực; cộng đồng; diễn ngôn di sản được ủy quyền; chính trị di sản từ dưới lên.*

* School of Interdisciplinary Sciences and Arts, Vietnam National University, Hanoi
Email: hienkhln@vnu.edu.vn

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and the politicization of cultural symbols, heritage has emerged not only as a system of cultural practices requiring safeguarding, but also as a contested terrain where different actors – including the state and communities – negotiate over power. In Vietnam, the adoption of international heritage norms, such as UNESCO's 2003 Convention, alongside national legal frameworks, has increasingly centralized the authority to define and manage heritage within state institutions. This shift has often resulted in the marginalization of community agency, despite frequent official invocation emphasizing community roles in heritage policy discourse.

This paper addresses the following questions: Are communities truly the "owners" or "bearers" of heritage, as officially claimed? What forms of power are being exercised, negotiated, or contested in the process of heritagization? To explore these questions, the paper examines three emblematic cases: (1) the Worship of the Hùng Kings – a nationalized, state-sponsored heritage practice; (2) the Practices Related to Việt Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of the Three Realms (hereafter referred to as the Practices of the Mother Goddesses) at Phủ Dầy palace and Bắc Lệ temple – an institutionalized spiritual heritage practice; and (3) Đường Lâm Ancient Village – a historical site whose inscription has generated tensions between heritage safeguarding and local livelihoods.

The theoretical foundation of this paper builds on Laurajane Smith's concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) and the growing body of scholarship on heritage politics from below. These frameworks illuminate how state institutions construct dominant narratives while communities negotiate, adapt, and, at times, resist these impositions. The analysis draws on over a decade of fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, participant observation during festivals, and discourse analysis of policy documents, heritage nomination files, and media reports. Based on this analysis, the paper demonstrates that heritage is not merely a legacy of the past but a space where power is institutionalized in the present – where community representation and voices are acknowledged only when they align with the state's governance framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW, METHODOLOGY
2.1. Literature Review

Cultural heritage – especially intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – is not a neutral or self-evident entity but a socially constructed process shaped by power, representation, and political choices. Recent critical heritage studies have increasingly focused on deconstructing the power structures embedded in seemingly apolitical heritage practices – ranging from inscription and management to interpretation and performance (Smith 2006), (Harrison 2013).

A key area of debate concerns the position and role of communities in the safeguarding and transmission of heritage. While international instruments such as UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage affirm that communities are the "bearers" and "creators" of heritage, in practice they are often excluded from decision-making spaces and included only as symbolic participants, their involvement heavily mediated by external institutions (Waterton, Smith & Campbell 2006). Mertz (1994) critiques the tendency to invoke a unified "community" as a legitimizing trope in heritage discourse, arguing that this essentialized image masks the internal diversity, conflicts, and contradictions inherent in living heritage practices.

Conversely, a growing body of scholarship emphasizes community agency in reinterpreting and reclaiming heritage. Ashley and Frank (2016) highlight how

"heritage from below" creates opportunities for local communities to reoccupy heritage spaces through discursive and artistic expression. Similarly, Fels (2018) demonstrates how community-based art initiatives can open up alternative spaces of visibility and voice for marginalized groups. Scholars such as Khanom et al. (2019) and Versey and Throne (2021) underscore the importance of shifting from top-down approaches toward more co-creative, community-led heritage governance. Fava (2021) further illustrates how meaningful community participation not only revives heritage spaces materially but also serves as a catalyst for social innovation and the reconfiguration of power relations, enabling institutional recognition of local voices.

In the Vietnamese context, a clear gap often emerges between heritage discourse and implementation. Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2021) observes that although communities are officially designated as "heritage bearers," they are frequently excluded from the Management Boards of heritage sites – bodies that wield substantial decision-making power in organizing, safeguarding, and transmitting heritage. For instance, at the Bắc Lệ communal temple, spirit mediums – those directly involved in religious practice – are not represented in official management structures and are only summoned when performance is required. Such arrangements not only diminish community agency but also distort the cultural and spiritual functions of heritage.

Nevertheless, some communities actively adapt to and restructure these power dynamics by organizing their own heritage performances and governance models. Studies by Lê Hồng Lý et al. (2012) show how practitioners of gong music, *Quan họ* singing, and *Đờn ca tài tử* have strategically leveraged heritage as a cultural resource to affirm social standing and develop flexible models of engagement amid tourism, urbanization, and globalization.

Collectively, this literature points to a fundamental need: to move beyond the rhetorical affirmation of community participation and instead interrogate power in heritage practices. Communities must be recognized not merely as heritage practitioners, but as co-creators and decision-makers – actors with the capacity to shape policy, discourse, and implementation alike.

2.2. Theoretical framework: Power, Authorized Heritage Discourse, and Politics from below

In heritage studies – particularly concerning intangible cultural heritage – power is not limited to administrative control but also includes discursive and institutional power: the authority to define, represent, and determine what is recognized as heritage, who has the right to practice it, and who is excluded (Smith 2006), (Waterton & Smith 2010). The concept of *discursive power* in heritage was developed by Laurajane Smith through her framework of *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (AHD). According to Smith, AHD constitutes a dominant discourse through which state institutions, experts, and international bodies such as UNESCO assert authority over what counts as heritage and how it should be safeguarded.

Clear examples of this process can be found in Vietnam, such as the state's formalization of the Hùng Kings' commemoration into a national ritual (Nguyễn Thị Hiền & Hoàng Cầm 2012), or the state's standardization of ceremonial scripts at Phủ Dầy, where communities have lost autonomy over ritual elements traditionally passed down through generations (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2022). In these cases, power operates not merely as cultural stewardship but as a fundamentally political assertion of heritage "orthodoxy" (Waterton & Watson 2011).

Institutional power, by contrast, refers to mechanisms enacted through legal and bureaucratic tools such as heritage laws, site management boards, and nomination

or evaluation procedures. These forms of power tend to operate top-down, relying on policy frameworks and state-appointed heritage councils. While communities are often acknowledged as "custodians" or "practitioners," their participation is typically conditional or consultative rather than authoritative. The case of Đường Lâm Ancient Village demonstrates how institutional power can override local agency: heritage designation subjected all restoration and construction activities in the safeguarding zone to state approval, restricting residents' ability to renovate their own homes and leading to conflict (Nguyễn Thị Hồng Nhung 2020), (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2023).

From a critical perspective, questions of power in heritage are not limited to "who manages," but extend to "who is heard, who defines, who represents, and who practices" (Foucault 1977), (Harrison 2013). Power is embedded in all decisions that appear technical or cultural – from who drafts nomination files to who is authorized to organize festivals or even who receives permits to perform rituals in sacred spaces. Heritage thus functions not merely as a cultural asset, but as a political institution through which social relationships and authority structures are continuously reconfigured and contested.

The AHD framework proposed by Smith (2006) has become a vital analytical tool in heritage studies, exposing how heritage is not simply a set of neutral cultural symbols but the outcome of power-laden processes of institutionalization. AHD explains how state and expert-led definitions of heritage often produce inequality in representation and participation, despite official recognition of communities as cultural agents. Local communities, while central to heritage creation, are often positioned as passive symbols or incorporated into hierarchical governance structures in ways that curtail their autonomy.

Expanding upon AHD, scholars such as Robertson (2008), Waterton and Watson (2011), and Muzaini and Minca (2018) have developed the notion of *heritage from below*, in which communities emerge as active agents who not only sustain heritage but also challenge and renegotiate dominant norms. These expressions of grassroots heritage politics include marginalized site reclamations (Robertson 2008), folk practice revivals, and local memory mobilizations as strategies of identity assertion and representational reclaiming (Waterton & Watson 2011), (Harrison 2013). Intangible practices – rituals, oral traditions, vernacular spirituality – thus become soft spaces of resistance to the materialization and bureaucratization of heritage under AHD.

This paper integrates both frameworks – AHD and heritage politics from below – to more fully examine how power, discourse, and community roles intersect in Vietnam's heritage governance. All three case studies reveal the interweaving of institutional power with community-level forms of negotiation and resistance. At the Hùng Kings Temple Complex, state-led ritual standardization has overshadowed village-based practices. In Phủ Dầy and Bắc Lệ, spirit mediums – core practitioners of the Mother Goddesses tradition – have been sidelined from official management structures. In Đường Lâm, local residents actively petitioned to withdraw from heritage inscription due to the constraints imposed on their daily lives.

In Vietnam, AHD operates not merely as top-down heritage construction but as institutional power that restructures relations among the state and communities through continuous negotiation – where communities are both the objects of management and potential agents of redefinition. By juxtaposing the critique of AHD with grassroots heritage politics, this paper exposes how heritage governance in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam is shaped by asymmetries of power, yet still contains spaces for community resistance, creativity, and dialogue.

2.3. Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining long-term ethnographic fieldwork, case study analysis, and discourse analysis to investigate how power, discourse, and community roles intersect in the governance and practice of cultural heritage in Vietnam. The research centers on three case studies located in Northern Vietnam: the Worship of the Hùng Kings, the Practices of the Mother Goddesses at Phủ Dầy palace and Bắc Lệ temple, and Đường Lâm Ancient Village.

The empirical foundation of this paper is based on more than a decade of field research conducted by the author (2010-2023), including participant observation at festivals and rituals, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic documentation of ceremonial practices. Interviews were conducted with a diverse set of actors, including spirit mediums, temple caretakers (*thủ nhang*), local residents, site management officials, and heritage experts. The author's direct involvement in preparing and advising intangible heritage nomination files for UNESCO – particularly those related to the Practices of the Mother Goddesses and the Worship of the Hùng Kings – provides additional insight into the policymaking and representational processes.

Discourse analysis was employed as both a theoretical and methodological tool, enabling a critical reading of policy documents, nomination dossiers, UNESCO reports, and national legislation (such as the 2024 Law on Cultural Heritage), as well as media coverage and public narratives. This analysis aims to trace how official heritage discourses are constructed, institutionalized, and operationalized, and how the voices of communities are incorporated, reframed, or excluded within these governance frameworks.

In parallel, case study analysis allows for comparative insights across distinct heritage sites, each representing a different model of governance and degree of community involvement. The selected cases illustrate a spectrum of state intervention – from the highly institutionalized ritual management at the Hùng Kings Temple Complex, to administrative oversight of spiritual spaces in Phủ Dầy palace and Bắc Lệ temple, and finally to the material heritage safeguarding regime in Đường Lâm Ancient Village. This comparative framework enables the identification of common patterns and divergences in how the state exercises power through heritage, as well as how communities respond – whether through adaptation, negotiation, or resistance. Overall, this methodological design is intended to capture the lived realities of heritage practice in Vietnam and to examine how cultural policy and governance structures shape, and are shaped by, community agency and institutional power.

3. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

3.1. Case Study 1: Power, the State, and the Community in the Worship of the Hùng Kings

The Worship of the Hùng Kings is a long-standing cultural and spiritual tradition rooted in the mythic origins of the Hùng sovereigns – revered as the founding ancestors of Văn Lang, the precursor to modern-day Vietnam. More than a sacred symbol of national origin, this tradition reflects the deeply held Vietnamese ethos of "*uống nước nhớ nguồn*" ("when drinking water, remember its source") and the enduring practice of ancestral veneration. Its spiritual center is the Hùng Temple Complex in Phú Thọ Province, widely regarded as the ancestral homeland of the Vietnamese people (Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Hạnh 2003). Beyond this central location, the practice is sustained in over 200 villages across Phú Thọ and throughout the country. It has even extended to Vietnamese diaspora communities, particularly in the Czech Republic and Germany, underscoring its vitality and symbolic power in connecting

people and reinforcing cultural identity. Within Vietnam's current heritage governance landscape, the Worship of the Hùng Kings reveals a complex interplay of power between the state and local communities. As an element inscribed on UNESCO's 2003 Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, this tradition functions not only as an ancestral ritual but also as a politically charged heritage space where state power and community agency intersect and are contested. In particular, the historically significant villages of Vi, Trẹo, and Cổ Tích – once entrusted with ritual leadership – illustrate the shifting dynamics of authority (Nguyễn Thị Hiền & Hoàng Cầm 2012).

In the over 200 villages across Phú Thọ that maintain the worship of the Hùng Kings and their generals, local communities continue to play a central role in organizing and performing the festivals (Bùi Quang Thanh 2011). Residents serve on temple committees, lead processions, perform ceremonial rites and folk songs, and – importantly – transmit ritual knowledge from elders to younger generations. A strong spirit of voluntarism, responsibility, and local pride fuels their active and enthusiastic engagement.

However, at the Hùng Temple Complex – the national epicenter of the worship – the power structure has undergone significant transformation. Since the practice was elevated to the status of a "national ceremony," the state has imposed a tightly managed administrative structure, headed by a Management Board under the provincial People's Committee of Phú Thọ, with coordination from various government departments and high-level political leadership (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2011). Every aspect – from planning the ceremonial script and assigning roles to determining the number of participants and selecting specific rituals – is dictated from the top down. In this model, local communities are relegated to the role of implementers, with little to no influence over ritual content or organization.

This deepening state intervention – through administrative formalization, standardization, and vertical governance – has gradually diminished the role of the community in the Worship of the Hùng Kings. According to the 2003 UNESCO Convention, communities should be at the heart of safeguarding and practicing heritage. Yet in the case of the Hùng Temple Complex, the community's role has been taken over by cultural management bodies and state authorities. Community members are no longer "ritual leaders" (*chủ lễ*), but rather delegated participants, mobilized for specific tasks. This shift in roles not only undermines local agency but also raises broader concerns about the community's capacity to represent and enact its own cultural identity (Nguyễn Thị Hiền & Hoàng Cầm 2012).

From the perspective of AHD (Smith 2006), the stratification of power in this heritage practice becomes especially apparent. In the villages of Phú Thọ – where rituals honoring Hùng-era generals are still vibrantly practiced – communities retain central control, organizing processions, conducting rites, preserving oral traditions, and passing down heritage through local pride and embodied memory. These bottom-up practices align with what Robertson (2008) and Waterton & Watson (2011) describe as "heritage from below", where communities define and sustain heritage on their own terms.

By contrast, at the Hùng Kings Temple Complex, designated by the state as the symbolic "national ancestral land", the official heritage discourse manifests through ritual bureaucratization. Following UNESCO's inscription, the annual commemoration was rebranded as a "national ceremony". The state – through the site's Management Board, the provincial government, and ministerial agencies – assumed full control of the

event: writing scripts, assigning personnel, designing rituals, and managing attendance. Community members, once central figures in ritual life, are now cast in auxiliary roles, embedded in a command-driven system (Nguyễn Thị Hiền & Hoàng Cầm 2012), (Lê Hồng Lý et al. 2012). As Smith (2006) and Waterton and Smith (2010) argue, AHD operates as a form of discursive power in which official institutions define "legitimate" heritage practices while sidelining unofficial or community-based forms.

The Hùng Temple Complex case exemplifies how AHD functions: heritage becomes a tool for consolidating national identity and state legitimacy while eroding community autonomy. The contrast between two levels of participation – grassroots heritage-making in local villages versus administrative management at the national shrine – exposes the vertical layering of power and highlights two opposing models: community-driven heritage from below and state-defined heritage from above. The case of the Worship of the Hùng Kings vividly illustrates that heritage is not merely a cultural practice, but a contested space of power, representation, and identity formation (Harrison 2013), (Foucault 1977). While UNESCO's Convention and national policy discourse frequently proclaim the centrality of communities, the reality reveals a framework in which communities are welcome only insofar as they comply with pre-established norms – and rarely hold decision-making power in the management or performance of heritage.

3.2. Case Study 2: Heritage, Power, and Governance in the Practices of the Mother Goddesses

The Practices related to Viêt Beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of the Three Realms (*Thờ Mẫu Tam Phủ*) centers on the veneration of the Holy Mother Liễu Hạnh and a pantheon of deities – Mothers, Mandarins (*Quan*), Princesses (*Chầu*), Damsels (*Cô*), and Princes (*Cậu*) – representing a multi-layered cosmology and reflecting themes of divine blessing and feminine authority within Việt culture. The belief system is structured around four cosmic realms: Heaven (*Thiên phủ*), Mountains (*Nhạc phủ*), Water (*Thoải phủ*), and Earth (*Địa phủ*), all animated most vividly through traditional festivals honoring the deities and the spirit possession ritual *Lên đồng* – a performative trance in which mediums invoke the deities for blessings, healing, and protection.

In 2016, the Practices of the Mother Goddesses were inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The inscription elevated the profile of the tradition within Vietnamese society, but also led, in certain localities, to a growing degree of institutionalization and administrative intervention. From the perspective of Laurajane Smith's (2006) concept of AHD, the case of the Practices of the Mother Goddesses illustrates how state power is deployed to redefine the value, form, and custodianship of heritage – often generating tensions between official policy frameworks and lived religious practice.

Phủ Dầy: Tensions Between Institutional Power and Community Autonomy: Phủ Dầy, located in Nam Định Province, is one of the most prominent spiritual complexes dedicated to the Mother Goddesses tradition. For decades, local communities – especially *thanh đồng* (spirit mediums) and ritual caretakers – operated the site autonomously, maintaining ceremonies, transmitting ritual knowledge, and organizing festivals in accordance with local cultural cycles. However, following UNESCO inscription, state intervention intensified, as exemplified by Decision No. 06/2015/QĐ-UBND issued by Vụ Bản District, which restructured the governance of Phủ Dầy under a formal Management Board overseen by commune, district, and departmental officials (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2022). Although the decree ostensibly aimed

to "empower the community," in practice it stripped ritual leaders of their autonomy, replacing community-led organization with state-supervised administration. The community – holders of lived knowledge and ritual experience – was not consulted for design of the new governance structure, prompting significant backlash from spirit mediums and caretakers. In fact, resistance was so strong that the decision could not be implemented (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2022). The new structure imposed top-down allocation of responsibilities, standardized ceremonial scripts, and strict participation protocols – transforming community members from cultural agents into passive executors, in direct contradiction of the principles of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, which affirms that communities should be at the center of safeguarding and practicing intangible heritage.

Bắc Lệ Temple: The Marginalization of Community Participation: At Bắc Lệ temple, governance adopted a nominally "community participation" model (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2021), yet in practice operated through a non-transparent nomination process controlled by commune leaders. As a result, spirit mediums and devotees with deep knowledge of the tradition were either excluded entirely or included only symbolically, without real decision-making power. Although the community was officially "invited" to take part in festival activities, their role was limited to supporting functions. Ritual masters (*đồng thầy* and *thầy cúng*) – the very practitioners capable of leading ceremonies – were left out of formal power structures and only consulted when deemed necessary by authorities. The resulting Management Board, dominated by local bureaucrats and representatives of mass organizations, lacked genuine representation from the tradition's core practitioners.

This case demonstrates how ostensibly participatory models can mask structural exclusion, reducing community involvement

to symbolic gestures rather than substantive agency – precisely the kind of structural exclusion criticized by Smith (2006) and Waterton & Smith (2010) in their analyses of AHD. The Bắc Lệ arrangement creates the appearance of inclusion while systematically denying communities formal decision-making power.

The Phủ Dầy and Bắc Lệ cases reveal the implementation gaps in the 2003 UNESCO Convention's principle of "community-centered" heritage. At Phủ Dầy, overt resistance from spirit mediums revealed the limits of state intervention in sacred practices. At Bắc Lệ, selective consultation and symbolic inclusion masked the absence of genuine community agency. These contrasting examples within the same tradition illustrate how heritage governance structures can differ dramatically depending on local political contexts, administrative arrangements, and the negotiating capacity of the communities involved.

What emerges is not a uniform model of state domination, but a spectrum of governance configurations that reflect broader tensions between institutional control and grassroots agency. Heritage in this context is not simply something to be "safeguarded," but a space of ongoing negotiation where community voices are only heard when they conform to the logic of state-defined management frameworks.

3.3. Case Study 3: The Ancient Village of Đường Lâm – From State Inscription to Community Resistance

Đường Lâm Ancient Village, located in Sơn Tây District on the outskirts of Hanoi, has long been recognized as a cultural space deeply imbued with the identity of the Vietnamese people in the Red River Delta. It is notable for its hundreds of traditional houses dating from the 17th to 19th centuries, along with religious structures such as communal houses, temples, ancient wells, and a distinctive network of laterite-

paved village roads typical of the midland region of Northern Vietnam. However, the heritage value of Đường Lâm lies not only in its architectural fabric but also in its entwinement with the everyday socio-cultural life of the local community – those who have preserved, continue to maintain, and are expected to carry forward local customs, spiritual practices, and festivals within this living space.

In 2005, when Đường Lâm was officially inscribed on the National List of Historical and Cultural Sites, a significant shift occurred: from a living community to a heritage entity under state management. From the perspective of AHD, this marks a process in which state institutions, experts, and public policy play a central role in defining "what counts as heritage" and "how it should be safeguarded." In Đường Lâm's case, a series of legal instruments – such as the Law on Cultural Heritage, Decision No. 68/2006/QĐ-UBND issued by the Sơn Tây District government, and ministerial-level safeguarding regulations – established a rigid management framework: residents were not allowed to build, renovate, or repair their houses without official approval. This represents the exercise of institutional power from the top down – a form of administrative authority that Smith (2006) and Waterton and Smith (2010) have analyzed as a key outcome of AHD. Under such power, the community – despite being the very subjects who live within and sustain the place's memory – were stripped of decision-making rights concerning their living space, livelihoods, and cultural practices, while authority over these matters shifted to specialized heritage institutions.

Tensions resulting from this institutionalization process came to a head in 2013, when 78 households in Đường Lâm jointly petitioned to be removed from the national heritage list. This collective act of resistance from below was a vivid expression of heritage politics at the grassroots level – a challenge to the value of heritage inscription when it fails to serve local people and instead becomes a burden on them (Nguyễn Thị Hồng Nhung 2020), (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2023). Villagers reported being unable to make essential repairs – to toilets, kitchens, or roofs – without first navigating multiple layers of approval, incurring considerable time and expense, and exacerbating the deterioration of their homes. More frustratingly, they felt their legal property rights were violated, as only a small number of households with antique homes benefited from the heritage status – through ticket revenues, restoration subsidies, or tourism services. This stratification of benefits not only created internal divisions within the community but also deepened local people's sense of exclusion from management processes affecting their daily lives.

Meanwhile, heritage policies remained fixated on notions of "authenticity" and "monumental integrity" – reflecting the materialist heritage paradigm that lies at the heart of AHD. Although local residents are the ones who live with and around the heritage, their involvement was limited to supportive roles; they were not granted the authority to shape or adapt conservation principles to fit the realities of everyday life. In this context, heritage became a tool for spatial and behavioral control masquerading as cultural safeguarding (Harrison 2013), (Foucault 1977). Yet the collective response of Đường Lâm villagers also illustrates local communities' capacity to challenge such power structures.

Although the movement did not lead to radical change in heritage management policies, it compelled authorities to reconsider the feasibility and human costs of their governance model. Thus, the Đường Lâm case raises not only questions about the safeguarding of ancient architecture but also, more fundamentally, about power, representation, and justice in heritage practice. When heritage becomes overly institutionalized and disconnected

from the living needs and legitimate aspirations of local communities, it ceases to be a developmental resource and instead becomes an obstacle – provoking the very communities it purports to honor to reject their designated heritage status.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Research Findings

An analysis of three emblematic heritage practices in Vietnam reveals complex entanglements between cultural heritage, institutional power, and community agency, exposing fundamental tensions in the contemporary institutionalization and governance of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The case of the Worship of Hùng Kings illustrates a stark stratification of power between two heritage models: an autonomous community-based model practiced in over 200 villages in Phú Thọ, where local people retain agency over ritual organization, and a state-administered model at the Hùng Kings Temple Historical Site, where the state fully designs and orchestrates the official national ceremony. In the state-administered version, communities are reduced to passive participants with no input into the content, format, or organization of rituals. Here, heritage becomes instrumentalized for the promotion of national identity and state authority rather than serving as a living space for the practice of community beliefs.

The Practices of the Mother Goddesses at Phủ Dầy palace and Bắc Lệ temple reveal deep contradictions between the self-governing spirit of religious communities and top-down institutional management. At Phủ Dầy, strong resistance from spirit mediums and temple caretakers against Decision No. 06/2015/QĐ-UBND of Vụ Bản District reflects frustration over the institutionalization of ritual practices without community consultation. Meanwhile, Bắc Lệ's ostensibly participatory model masks

substantive exclusion – while mediums and devotees perform essential ritual functions, they are excluded from formal governance structures and are only summoned when "expert advice" is needed. These parallel cases highlight a widespread pattern in heritage management in Vietnam: community voices are welcomed when they align with state management goals, but sidelined when they diverge.

Đường Lâm Ancient Village's heritage inscription exemplifies preservation policies prioritizing architectural "authenticity" and "material integrity" over community needs. Restrictive regulations governing home modifications, including basic amenities like kitchens and toilets, have severely constrained residents' living conditions. Moreover, the inequitable distribution of benefits – between households whose houses have been restored and those subject to restrictions without receiving support – reveals structural inequalities in heritage valuation and resource allocation.

Taken together, these three cases point to a notable common denominator: heritage functions not merely as preserved cultural space but also as a structure of power – a mechanism for restructuring representation, recognition, and participation through top-down administrative frameworks. Despite the 2003 UNESCO Convention's community-centric rhetoric, AHD in practice routinely transforms heritage bearers into support actors or managed subjects. This study thus argues that it is essential to reimagine the relationship between the state and communities in heritage governance. Governance models must move beyond administrative rationales toward genuinely decentralized mechanisms, where communities are not only ritual practitioners but also decision-makers and beneficiaries. Only when heritage is understood as a space for dialogue, power-sharing, and co-creation can conservation efforts be sustainable, equitable, and truly embedded in the lived

realities of the communities concerned.

4.2. Discussion

By linking theoretical frameworks with specific empirical case studies, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of heritage as not merely a legacy of the past, but a dynamic arena where power relations are continuously contested, restructured, and negotiated among diverse stakeholders.

At the theoretical level, this study expands the scope of the AHD framework beyond its conventional focus on tangible heritage to encompass religious practices and the living spaces of communities. Through an analysis of how state institutions and formal regulations seek to standardize and bureaucratize heritage practices, the paper demonstrates that AHD not only defines what is considered valuable heritage but also reshapes the role and voice of practicing communities – transforming them from active agents into managed subjects, whose participation is often reduced to tokenistic inclusion rather than substantive empowerment.

Empirically, the paper presents three comparative case studies that illustrate distinct configurations of dominant and community-led heritage discourses. The case of the Hùng Kings Temple reveals how the bureaucratization of rituals marginalizes communities' ceremonial role; the Phủ Dầy and Bắc Lệ examples show how top-down governance in spiritual spaces leads to tensions and resistance from practitioners; while Đường Lâm village exemplifies the tension between tangible architectural conservation and residents' rights to housing and livelihoods. Together, these cases go beyond documenting the exclusion of communities – they highlight the capacity for grassroots resistance and negotiation, most vividly seen in the collective petition by Đường Lâm villagers to withdraw from national heritage listing.

The paper also provides a critical perspective on current heritage policies in Vietnam. While official documents continue to affirm the "central role" of communities in line with the spirit of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, actual governance models remain centralized, top-down, and control-oriented. The paper advocates for more flexible and inclusive mechanisms that meaningfully empower communities in the organization and practice of heritage. This perspective helps introduce critical heritage discourse to the Vietnamese context – where heritage is increasingly used not only to construct national identity but also to define and reinforce power relations.

In sum, this paper contributes both empirically and conceptually: it provides grounded case studies while also reconfiguring how "community" is understood in heritage studies. Rather than viewing the community as a static or homogenous entity, the paper portrays it as a dynamic and layered space – subject to institutional power but also capable of rearticulating heritage based on lived realities. Heritage, through this lens, cannot be fully understood without reference to its political context, the structures of power that shape it, and the agency of those who practice it.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the complex relationship between heritage, power, and community in contemporary Vietnam through three emblematic case studies. Rather than treating heritage as a neutral entity in need of safeguarding, the paper approaches it as a contested field of power – one in which struggles over identity, representation, and practice unfold between the state, experts, and communities.

From the three case studies – the Worship of the Hùng Kings, the Practices of the Mother Goddesses at Phủ Dầy palace and Bắc Lệ temple, and Đường Lâm Ancient Village – it is evident that the process of heritagization not only reinforces the

authority of certain institutions but also reshapes social structures and reconfigures local power relations. Under the framework of AHD, communities – despite being officially recognized as "heritage bearers" – are often pushed to the margins, reduced to symbolic or passive roles rather than empowered as active participants in heritage definition, practice, and benefit-sharing.

A key contribution of this study lies in illustrating how top-down governance mechanisms – though often justified in the name of safeguarding – can unintentionally or deliberately erode community autonomy and creative agency. The tensions, responses, and negotiations arising from communities – whether quietly expressed in Bắc Lệ or overtly in Đường Lâm and Phủ Dầy – demonstrate that local actors are far from passive recipients of heritage policies; rather they emerge as dynamic agents of resistance, reinterpretation, and redefinition when conditions permit. From a policy perspective, the research underscores the urgent need to transform heritage governance models toward genuine decentralization, dialogue, and co-creation, moving beyond symbolic or tokenistic forms of participation. Without such fundamental changes, heritage policies risk becoming mere exercises in formalistic safeguarding, lacking the genuine consensus and long-term commitment of the communities who live with and sustain heritage on a daily basis.

Ultimately, this paper contributes to a more critical and reflexive understanding of heritage – not merely as a cultural asset or national symbol, but as a socio-political institution capable of shaping power dynamics and community voice. It is precisely within these seemingly "purely cultural" spaces that deeper social conflicts, demands for justice, legitimacy, and representation are becoming increasingly visible – and must be acknowledged as integral to heritage conservation in the 21st century.

REFERENCES

Ashley, S. L. T., and Frank, S., (2016). Introduction: Heritage-outside-in. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *22*(10), 733-744. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2016.1213763

Bùi Quang Thanh (2011). *Báo cáo tổng kết kiểm kê tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương [Inventory report on the worship of Hùng Kings]*. Bản đánh máy. Lưu trữ tại viện Viện Văn hóa, Nghệ thuật, Thể dục, và thể thao quốc gia Việt Nam.

Fava, F. (2021). Commoning adaptive heritage reuse as a driver of social innovation. *Sustainability*, *13*(17), 9802. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13179802.

Fels, L. M. (2018). Working the margins of community-based adult learning. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *30*(1), 67-81.

Foucault, M., (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Harrison, R., (2013). *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London and New York: Routledge.

Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2011). Administratizing the national ceremony of the ancestral Hùng Kings. *Vietnam Social Sciences*, 6, 21-33

Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Hạnh (2003). *Khu di tích đền Hùng trong tiến trình lịch sử dân tộc [Hùng King Temple Complex in the historical course of the nation]*. Luận án tiến sĩ lịch sử. Viện Sử học.

Nguyễn Thị Hiền & Hoàng Cầm (2012). *Sáng tạo truyền thống: nghiên cứu trường hợp Giỗ tổ Hùng Vương vào ngày mồng 10 tháng 3 âm lịch hàng năm [Creating tradition: A case study of the Hùng King's death anniversary on the 10th day of the 3rd lunar month]*. Kỷ yếu Hội thảo quốc tế "Tín ngưỡng thờ cúng tổ tiên trong xã hội đương đại: Trường hợp tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương ở Việt Nam [Proceedings of the International Conference "Ancestor worship in contemporary society: The case of Hùng King worship in Vietnam"], 874-886.

Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2021). Ban Quản lý di tích: Hình thức tăng cường quản lý nhà nước [Monument Management Board: Form of strengthening state management]. *Nghiên cứu Văn hóa Việt Nam*, *3*(195), 3-11.

Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2022). Quản lý văn hóa với thực hành Thờ mẫu tam phủ của người việt Từ góc độ liên bộ, liên ngành, liên cấp [Cultural Governance of the Mother Goddess of Three Palaces Practice in Vietnam: A Multi-Ministerial, Multi-Sectoral, and Multi-Level Perspective]. *Văn hóa học*, *5*(63), 43-51.

Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2023). *Di sản hóa và ghi danh di sản ở Việt Nam [Heritagization and Heritage Inscription in Vietnam]*. Nhà xuất bản Văn học.

Khanom, S., Moyle, B., Scott, N., and Kennelly, M., (2019). Host-guest authentication of intangible cultural heritage. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, *14*(5-6), 401-414.

Lê Hồng Lý et al., (2012). *Vai trò của môi trường thực hành văn hóa trong việc bảo tồn di sản: Bài học từ các dự án bảo tồn di sản cồng chiêng và nhã nhạc [The role of cultural practice environment in heritage conservation: Lessons from gong and royal music heritage safeguarding projects]*. Kỷ yếu Hội thảo quốc tế: Bảo tồn và phát huy lễ hội cổ truyền trong xã hội Việt Nam đương đại (trường hợp Hội Gióng) [Proceedings of the International Conference: Preserving and promoting traditional festivals in contemporary Vietnamese society (the case of the Gióng Festival)], 475-498.

Mertz, E., (1994). Legal loci and places in the heart: Community and identity in sociolegal studies. *Law & Society Review*, *28*(5), 971-996.

Nguyễn Thị Hồng Nhung (2020). Post-inscription safeguarding of Đường Lâm Ancient Village heritage. *Vietnam Social Sciences*, 4, 47-64.

Smith, L., (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge.

Versey, H. S., and Throne, R., (2021). A critical review of Gullah Geechee midlife women and heirs' property challenges. In G. Hasnat & M. Hossain (Eds.), *Examining International Land Use Policies, Changes, and Conflicts* (pp. 46-64). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

Waterton, E., Smith, L., and Campbell, G., (2006). The utility of discourse analysis to heritage studies. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *12*(4), 339-355.

Waterton, E., and Smith, L., (2010). The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *16*(1-2), 4-15.

Waterton, E., and Watson, S., (2011). *Heritage and Community Engagement: Collaboration or Contestation?* London and New York: Routledge.