

# Preserving and promoting the cultural values of Vietnam's traditional Ao Dai

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**Abstract:** *The traditional Ao Dai is deeply intertwined with the history and culture of Vietnam and has become one of the country's "cultural ambassadors." The Oxford Dictionary has also included the Ao Dai as a distinctive product of Vietnam. The article summarizes the history and development of the dress through various periods, outlines the current state of efforts to preserve and promote its value in Vietnam, highlights the achievements, and identifies the challenges that need to be addressed. Based on this, the author proposes several solutions to enhance the effectiveness of preserving and promoting the value of this cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** *Ao Dai; tradition; Vietnam; heritage; culture; preservation; costume; cultural value.*

## 1. Introduction

Preserving and conserving traditional costumes are crucial for every nation. Not only Vietnam but any other nation with a long history and tradition cares deeply about preserving its national attire, as it reflects its people's unique identity, spirit, and essence. The traditional costume helps outline the fundamental characteristics of the community's labor processes, production activities, and cultural and religious practices, all of which have evolved throughout history. It also serves as a non-verbal language passed down through generations telling a story of human endeavor to conquer nature, develop customs and traditions,

and uphold beliefs and aspirations to master one's own destiny.

With these precious values, the Ao Dai of Vietnam carries in itself the mission of being the Vietnamese people's traditional attire in general and the symbol of Vietnamese women's beauty in particular, being a distinctive and highly recognizable dress in the eyes of international friends. The traditional Ao Dai has accompanied the Vietnamese people throughout their integration and development into the global community, becoming an indispensable part of their social life. If this traditional attire happened to fade away for some reason, it would

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lead to the loss of the cultural values and national identity that we have maintained and nurtured over our thousands-of-years history of national construction and protection.

Vietnam's traditional Ao Dai has been facing an unprecedented challenge in its development recently due to Generation Z's creative freedom and the encroaching influence of fashion cultures from international integration and the digital world. It will either harmoniously combine its traditional characteristics with freshness and modernity, creating sustainable values or be distorted to become "a hybrid without identity" that will gradually fade over time. Therefore, preserving and promoting its values have become an urgent issue in the current trend of integration and development. This is not only a primary concern facing cultural activists and historians but also a topic of interest for organizations, businesses, designers, and the public in general, who deeply care about how to ensure that this dress, considered Vietnam's "national costume", can have eternal vitality, preserving and spreading the cultural values that represent the quintessence of Vietnamese identity for generations to come.

## **2. The origin and development history of Vietnam's traditional Ao Dai**

The traditional Ao Dai of the Vietnamese people has undergone various stages of development, from the early modern period to the late modern period and the contemporary period. Transcending the value of a mere consumer product, this attire has become a distinctive cultural product deeply imbued with the national identity and a symbol of Vietnamese women.

The history of the Vietnamese Ao Dai dates back to the early modern period. Its earliest known form was the Giao linh (also called Giao lanh), which appeared around 1744 in Dang Trong (Southern Vietnam) under the reign of Lord Nguyen Phuc Khoat, who is credited with pioneering and shaping the Ao Dai into a distinctly Vietnamese costume. In the early 18<sup>th</sup>

century, due to the need for wildland reclamation, Dang Trong saw the arrival of tens of thousands of Minh Huong people from China, leading to deep cultural exchanges, including in clothing. In response to this new wave of cultural influence and to preserve a unique identity, Lord Nguyen Phuc Khoat issued a decree on attire for his people, thus laying the Ao Dai's foundation: "For regular wear, both men and women shall wear garments with upright collars and short sleeves, with the sleeves either wide or narrow as desired. The garment must be sewn closed along both sides below the armpits and not left open. However, men unwilling to wear narrow-sleeved, round-collared garments for convenience during work may be exempted." (Quoc su quan, 1925). In his work named Phu Bien Tap Luc (1776), historian Le Quy Don remarked: "Lord Nguyen Phuc Khoat had historically written the very first pages for the Ao Dai." Undeniably, the Ao Dai is a product of the Vietnamese people's unique cultural and humanistic values. It is deeply tied to their material production, communal life, and profound national pride. With its inherently Vietnamese origins and association with the hard-working, humble lives of the laboring people - particularly women - the Ao Dai has since its inception embodied Vietnamese women's virtues of resilience, diligence, simplicity, and noble sacrifice.

A new trend known as the "modernized Ao Dai" has emerged in recent years. This attire reimagines the traditional Ao Dai by blending its elegance and grace with practical elements to enhance comfort and practicality for everyday wear. Upon its initial introduction, the modernized version sparked considerable debate. Some fashion critics expressed concerns, noting its resemblance to China's modernized Qipao (called Cheongsam in English). The comparison between the two is not new, given the long-standing cultural and historical connections between the two neighboring countries and certain design similarities of these two costumes that

highlight Asian women's grace and elegance. However, upon examining their origins, characteristics, and styles, the differences of each garment can be seen clearly.

In terms of origins, the Vietnamese Ao Dai originated in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the Nguyen Lords in Southern Vietnam (Dang Trong) and was a popular costume. In contrast, the Cheongsam originated from Manchu noble women's clothing during the Qing Dynasty, becoming popular at the end of that period and the beginning of the Republic of China. Chronologically, it is challenging to determine which garment appeared first definitively. However, their origins differ in cultural context, target users and purpose. Specifically, the Ao Dai Ngu Linh was initially made in order to distinguish the clothing of the Vietnamese from that worn by the Minh Huong people who had migrated from China. This led to differences in design, materials, colors, and patterns, as outlined below:

*Firstly*, regarding style. The Cheongsam is typically fitted or lightly straight-cut, emphasizing the wearer's physical curves and measurements. It has slits on both sides of the lower part up to the thigh, covering the hips, and is typically worn without long pants or a skirt. The Ao Dai, on the other hand, can be straight-cut or flared, with a form-fitting top that emphasizes the wearer's bust and waist, and the skirt slits extend to the hip, always worn with long pants or a skirt.

*Secondly*, regarding material. The Cheongsam is usually made from thicker, stiffer materials, such as brocade, raw silk, or lace, with brocade being the most common. The Vietnamese Ao Dai, however, uses various materials, with a preference for lighter, more delicate fabrics such as chiffon, silk, and soft lace.

*Thirdly*, regarding colors and patterns. The traditional Cheongsam is often plain with a preference for light, solid colors, predominantly white, and its modernized versions tend to be bold and colorful, with

intricate patterns such as dragons, phoenixes, and peonies. The Ao Dai was initially primarily dark-colored and later transitioned to lighter, solid colors or subtle, elegant patterns, such as small flowers or lotus blooms. Bold patterns and colors are typically reserved for festive occasions like grand openings, Lunar New Year, or traditional celebrations.

Thus, while the Cheongsam from China originated from noble attire designed to highlight the figure and appeal to a narrower circle of users due to its form-fitting nature, the Ao Dai of Vietnam has more humble origins, making it suitable for all Vietnamese women, regardless of body type. Any Vietnamese woman can confidently wear the Ao Dai radiating their grace and charm, whether during daily activities or at formal ceremonies.

### **3. Current preservation and promotion of the values of Vietnam's traditional Ao Dai**

#### *3.1. Achievements*

Throughout its history of formation and development, the Ao Dai has consistently attracted attention from authorities, cultural experts, the fashion industry, and the general public in Vietnam. It aims to preserve its traditional essence while infusing it with new elements that enhance its aesthetic value and versatility. The culture of wearing the Ao Dai is deeply tied to various aspects of Vietnamese people's life, especially that of women. Honoring the beauty of the Ao Dai is thus also honoring the strength, resilience, and diligence of Vietnamese women.

From a management perspective, hundreds of national, regional, and local scientific conferences have been held to preserve and promote the traditional Ao Dai's values. In 2016, the development strategy of Vietnam's Cultural Industries to 2020, with a vision towards 2030, was approved under Decision No. 1755/QĐ-TTg, dated September 8, 2016, identifying 12 sectors with a special emphasis on the design industry. The Ao Dai was defined as a key cultural product to develop the cultural industry. The dress has since become a symbol

of Vietnamese culture and is used to promote and showcase its uniqueness compared to the culture of other countries. The Ao Dai is now present in tourist gift shops, offered as a souvenir for international friends, and worn widely by Vietnamese women for national and international ceremonies, significant national events, festivals, weddings, and leisure activities. Many government agencies, offices, and schools have adopted specific days for wearing the Ao Dai. The Ao Dai has become integral to Vietnam's cultural and social activities.

In recent years, many practical activities have been implemented in Vietnam to promote the recognition of the Ao Dai as a national heritage. The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, the Vietnam Women's Union, and local governments across the country have organized various Ao Dai programs, conferences, competitions, and festivals to gather opinions, data, and resources to build the heritage registration dossier. The preservation of traditional Ao Dai craft villages has also been given attention, both administratively and in terms of social-economic development support, honoring artisans, and emphasizing the importance of passing down the craft to subsequent generations to ensure that traditional Ao Dai-making does not fade away. At the same time, efforts have been made to establish legal frameworks to make the Ao Dai a product of the cultural industry. The success of Thua Thien Hue province in its project "Hue - The Ao Dai capital of Vietnam" has led to the inclusion of "The knowledge of tailoring and wearing Ao Dai in Hue" in the national intangible cultural heritage list (Tang, 2014). This not only paves the way for preserving and promoting knowledge of tailoring and wearing Ao Dai in the province but also serves as the foundation for effectively promoting the dress, boosting tourism, and affirming the brand of Vietnamese Ao Dai across both domestic and international fashion communities.

The State has paid significant attention to honoring the dress through annual events like

the Ao Dai Festival, held across the country every March, lasting for several months and featuring numerous special events, becoming a cultural highlight in people's lives. In Hue, the Ao Dai Festival is one of the official programs of the Hue Festival, enriching and diversifying the festival's agenda and contributing to its success. The Ho Chi Minh City Ao Dai Festival has been held nine times, with the 2023 edition featuring 22 KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) from various fields as its image ambassadors. Notably, the event welcomed the participation of female consuls general and spouses of consuls general from other countries wearing Ao Dai to support the activities, aiming to strengthen the friendship between Vietnam and their countries. In 2023, the Hanoi Ao Dai Tourism Festival was held from October 27 to 30 at the Ba Kieu Temple Flower Garden, with the opening night themed "Exploring Hanoi's Charm" broadcast live on Hanoi Radio and Television Broadcasting (Hoa, 2024).

The State and the People's efforts to revive the traditional Ao Dai have seen many positive changes. With the increasing demand for Ao Dai, production facilities, vocational training centers, and businesses dedicated to traditional Ao Dai have been growing. This helps Vietnamese people preserve the value of their traditional heritage, promotes cultural identity and aesthetic values, and tailors' secrets while restoring traditional handicraft villages. Additionally, as Vietnam opens up and integrates more deeply into the international community, the image of Vietnamese Ao Dai has become familiar worldwide, serving as one of Vietnam's symbols in the eyes of the global community. The Ao Dai represents the beauty of Vietnamese people. It evokes images of a beautiful, friendly, and peaceful Vietnam, leaving on international visitors a lasting impression of the country as a culturally rich destination. Therefore, the International Cooperation Department (under the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism) has prioritized promoting the beauty of the Ao Dai in international programs.



To date, several projects and programs have been launched to promote the image of the Vietnamese Ao Dai globally. For example, in 2021, the program “The World in Vietnamese Ao Dai” showcased 600 Ao Dai outfits from 15 collections by 15 Vietnamese designers inspired by the cultures of different countries. In celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vietnam - Italy diplomatic relations (1973 - 2023), in 2022, the program “Ao Dai Heritage - the Cultural Value of Love” was launched by the Italian Embassy in Hanoi, the Vietnamese Embassy in Rome, and the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam (ICHAM), with the cooperation of Golden Heritage, presenting Ao Dai special collections designed by both Italian and Vietnamese fashion designers (Thu, 2023).

In 2019, the Vietnam Women's Union initiated and collaborated with the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to organize events under the theme “Ao Dai - Vietnam's cultural heritage.” Several excellent films exploring the life and culture of Vietnamese clothing, such as *Leu Chong*, *Long Thanh Cam Gia Ca* (The Musician at the Dragon Citadel), *Ao Lua Ha Dong* (The White Silk Dress), and *Co Ba Sai Gon* (The Tailor), have created a buzz in the film industry, attracting millions of viewers both domestically and internationally. In the design field, Vietnamese Ao Dai is increasingly making its mark. These events have brought the dress back into the daily lives of Vietnamese people, stimulating the Ao Dai cultural industry's growth, providing spiritual value, and contributing to economic growth. According to a social survey conducted by *Kinh te va Do thi Magazine*, more than 80% of Vietnamese women own Ao Dai, with about 30% wearing it more than once a month, including 5% wearing it daily; 80% of women are willing to spend one million VND to buy an Ao Dai, and nearly 70% prefer wearing the dress because of its traditional significance and the grace they feel while wearing it; and, over 80% of Vietnamese women believe that

wearing the Ao Dai is one of Vietnam's beautiful traditions and that Ao Dai culture should be preserved for the future (Anh, 2022).

With the concerted efforts of localities, social organizations, recent tourism and fashion businesses, and the public, the cultural value of Ao Dai has been leveraged to promote and honor this iconic Vietnamese costume while simultaneously driving economic and tourism development. Businesses have worked hard to promote the Ao Dai through artistic programs and fashion shows. Souvenir manufacturers also take advantage of the opportunity to produce stamps, postcards, photographs, paintings, and other items to promote the dress. Many localities encourage tourists visiting Vietnam to wear Ao Dai to experience the culture and take photos at iconic traditional sites. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Thua Thien Hue welcomed 4.9 million visitors. Conservatively estimating that 10% of these tourists had an Ao Dai tailored during their visit translates to 490,000 Ao Dai sold. With an average price of 1 million VND per unit, the revenue reached 490 billion VND. Thua Thien Hue aims to welcome 7 million tourists by 2030, potentially generating an annual revenue of 700 billion VND from Ao Dai production, or up to 2,100 to 2,800 billion VND if the “Hue - Ao Dai capital of Vietnam” brand is successfully established, attracting 30-40% of visitors to buy the costume (Minh, 2022).

According to statistics from Metric, a platform specializing in e-commerce data analytics, Vietnamese consumers spent 41.5 billion VND to purchase nearly 245,000 Ao Dai on four major e-commerce platforms (Shopee, Lazada, Tiki, and Sendo) in December 2023, just before the 2024 Lunar New Year. This represents a 6% increase compared to the same period of the previous year. The total revenue from Ao Dai sales on online platforms in 2023 reached over 196 billion VND, marking a 16% growth compared to 2022. Last year, 894,000 Ao Dai were provided to the market by 2,200 sellers. Shopee's top 10 Ao Dai sellers accounted for 11% of the total revenue in this

category. The largest store sold over 31,100 Ao Dai annually, generating more than 7.4 billion VND in revenue (Tung, 2024).

### *3.2. Challenges to be addressed*

There have been many positive signs in preserving and promoting the values of Vietnam's Ao Dai. However, there are still specific concerns regarding the management efforts. The Ao Dai has not yet been included in the national heritage registry, nor is there a legal basis for proposing it as an intangible cultural heritage at the national and global levels. There is also no official regulation stipulating the standards for the Ao Dai, which has led to discrepancies in the knowledge related to this traditional costume with a proliferation of “copycat” tailoring businesses aimed at commercializing the culture. Additionally, there needs to be a specific mechanism to preserve and support traditional Ao Dai craft villages, resulting in the decline of even long-established villages like Van Phuc (Hanoi) and Nha Xa (Ha Nam), which are increasingly industrialized. There are even poorly made or hybrid Ao Dai products deviating from its traditional values, leading to the market being flooded with culturally and aesthetically flawed products that cause frustration among cultural management authorities and consumers. Along with the liberalization trend, some young people's interpretations of traditional dress have become overly relaxed, even off-putting, undermining the delicate beauty of the traditional Ao Dai.

## **4. Solutions to preserve and promote the value of Vietnam's traditional Ao Dai**

*First*, developing and supplementing projects, programs, and proposals for preserving and promoting the Ao Dai's value.

This is a key solution, serving as the foundation for effectively achieving the objectives of the progress of preserving and promoting the value of Vietnam's Ao Dai heritage. The set goals must be precisely aligned with the socio-economic development objectives of each locality, leveraging local strengths and potentials while being

consistent with the national cultural development goals. A detailed plan is needed to ensure that the Ao Dai becomes not only a product of advanced culture that is rich in national identity, but also a representation of Vietnamese people's regional characteristics and part of the nation's broader cultural flow.

During the implementation process, attention should be focused on mobilizing and utilizing resources effectively, combining the state's management role with the people's active and voluntary participation in preserving and developing the culture of sewing and wearing traditional Ao Dai. Regular inspections, evaluations, experience drawing, timely recognition of exemplary models, and strict handling of violations should be crucial to ensure that these projects and programs are carried out successfully.

*Second*, researching, restoring, and standardizing the criteria for the traditional Ao Dai.

This is an important solution, providing a foundation for management authorities to distinguish the traditional Ao Dai and serving as the basis for determining technical and legal requirements for preparing dossiers for heritage recognition. This would help position the Ao Dai as a national intangible cultural heritage and, eventually, propose that UNESCO register it as a world intangible cultural heritage.

To implement this solution, thorough research and restoration of the Ao Dai's forms throughout different historical periods must be conducted. Based on the archived documents, consultations with cultural experts, scholars, fashion designers, and public opinion, a specific, clear, detailed, and standardized form of Vietnam's Ao Dai should be established. Collaboration between artisans, designers, and experts from various craft villages, regions, and countries is crucial to creating Ao Dai designs that meet common standards.

Once standardized, these artifacts should be publicly displayed in cultural institutions to showcase traditional costumes. This will

provide the public, especially Ao Dai artisans, with an apparent reference to determine the criteria and standards of the Ao Dai. Additionally, this will reinforce the high cultural values of the dress as it embodies national identity and establishes its position on the map of traditional costumes regionally and globally.

*Third*, building a network of traditional industries and fostering connections between artisans, designers, and professional tailors in craft villages, localities, and nationwide.

This solution is crucial to ensuring the conditions of material and human resources for preserving and promoting Ao Dai as a traditional Vietnamese costume. A coordinated effort between many traditional industries is required to create a product that truly embodies the cultural, artistic, aesthetic, and economic values of the Ao Dai. This includes mulberry tree cultivation, silkworm farming, loom construction, thread spinning, silk weaving, and tailoring methods - all integral to producing a genuine Ao Dai. Folk artisans, skilled tailors, and designers with expertise of designing and tailoring the dress are essential in producing high-quality garments. Furthermore, it is important to invest in training skilled tailors who deeply understand the values of the Ao Dai and can turn designs into exquisite craftsmanship. Proper attention should be given to training and passing down its tailoring experience from artisans to younger generations. When designers' creative ideas and skilled tailors' techniques merge and new aesthetic values are created, the Ao Dai's values are raised to a new level.

*Fourth*, raising awareness of national cultural preservation and honoring individuals and organizations that contribute significantly to the preservation and promotion of Ao Dai heritage values.

This solution is important for motivating scholars, artisans, designers, tailors, and the broader community to work together in preserving and promoting the value of the

traditional Vietnamese Ao Dai. Culture is an internal strength; thus, to preserve and promote the Ao Dai heritage, it is essential to educate and raise awareness of preserving traditional values within the community so that they have proper awareness and actions. Every Vietnamese citizen should understand that preserving the cultural heritage embodied in the Ao Dai is a practical and vital duty, as each Ao Dai represents the sacred word "Vietnam." Each Ao Dai worn by a Vietnamese woman carries great pride in the nation's traditional and aesthetic values, and the dress itself acts as a "cultural ambassador" representing Vietnam to the world. Therefore, those who directly create the Ao Dai also convey images of the nation's heritage, genuinely becoming the soul-bearers of Vietnam's history, culture, and life embodied in this costume.

Furthermore, it is necessary to implement policies for rewarding, honoring, and proposing state-level titles for individuals and organizations who have significantly contributed to protecting and promoting the values of the Ao Dai heritage. Creating favorable conditions for senior artisans to pass down their skills and secrets of Ao Dai, tailoring to younger generations in families, clans, schools, and clubs to protect and preserve this heritage for future generations. Cultural spaces dedicated to the traditional Ao Dai should be established and maintained, and festivals showcasing the Ao Dai should be further organized at local, national, and international levels. Learning from the experiences of countries around the world, especially Asian countries, in preserving, protecting, and building the brand of their national costumes, such as Kimono (Japan), Hanbok (Korea), and Hanfu (China), to elevate the Ao Dai to the level it deserves as a costume embodying the soul of the Vietnamese people.

## 5. Conclusion

The preservation and promotion of the beautiful traditional cultural values of the Vietnamese people, including the Ao Dai, is a responsibility shared by all citizens, the whole political system, and the entire nation in

building an advanced culture that is rich in national identity and in creating an internal strength for sustainable development. With the determination of the Party Committees and governments at all levels, and the active involvement of specialized agencies, as well as the enthusiastic support of the people, the authorities have implemented practical and specific solutions to preserve, protect, and promote the traditional cultural values of the Vietnamese Ao Dai. These efforts are not only of cultural importance but also carries significant social-economic value, positioning the Ao Dai as a “brand ambassador” for Vietnam, a cultural industrial product worth billions of dollars. This will boost the livelihoods of people in traditional Ao Dai production villages and the entire Vietnamese fashion industry, contributing to the integration and development process.

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