

From Influence to Localization: Chinese-Associated Repertoires in Vietnamese Visual Arts

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Chinese-associated repertoires in Vietnamese visual arts through localization rather than one-way influence. Drawing on qualitative visual-cultural analysis and selected scholarship on dynastic imagery, ceramics, court-commissioned porcelain, folk prints, and architectural ornament, it asks how circulating forms became meaningful in Vietnamese settings. The analysis identifies five interconnected operations: formal adaptation, material translation, functional recontextualization, semantic rearticulation, and institutional appropriation. Dragons, cloud-and-wave patterns, porcelain forms, auspicious images, and architectural motifs retained links to a wider Sinitic and East Asian visual world, yet their appearance, patronage, ritual use, and political meaning were altered by Vietnamese courts, workshops, religious communities, and vernacular audiences. The article argues that resemblance alone cannot establish cultural dependency. Layered attribution—distinguishing production, design, patronage, function, and interpretation—offers a more accurate account of Vietnamese agency and a fairer basis for heritage representation.

Keywords: *Vietnam–China cultural exchange; visual arts; localization; material culture; heritage interpretation*

1. Introduction

Cultural interaction between Vietnam and China developed through proximity, political contact, Buddhism, Confucian education, diplomacy, trade, and the movement of artisans

and objects. These connections made Chinese-associated forms highly visible in Vietnamese court art, ceramics, religious architecture, and popular imagery. Yet the conventional language of “Chinese influence” can be analytically limiting. It often treats China as the source of complete forms and Vietnam as the site of reproduction, leaving insufficient space for selection, modification, and competing regional connections.

Vietnamese history provides strong reasons to reject a simple source-and-copy model. Vietnamese rulers adopted institutions and symbols associated with the Sinitic world while repeatedly reworking them to claim political autonomy and local legitimacy (Woodside, 1971; Taylor, 2013). Visual objects reveal the same process materially: forms crossed borders, but their meanings changed with new patrons, media, sites, and ritual practices. Similarity therefore indicates a relationship to be investigated, not proof of passive dependence.

A persistent gap remains between historical accounts of Vietnam–China relations and object-centered explanations of how visual forms changed after circulation. Studies often document either political contact or individual media, while fewer works compare the mechanisms operating across court art, ceramics, religious architecture, and vernacular prints. A cross-domain approach can identify what is shared among these media without treating them as identical. It can also distinguish visual borrowing from technical transfer, commissioned production, parallel development, and later heritage interpretation.

This article asks how Chinese-associated visual repertoires circulated in Vietnam and how they were localized. Localization is defined as the transformation of a circulating form through changes in shape, material, function, meaning, or institutional control. The central argument is that Vietnamese visual culture operated through selective translation. Courts, workshops, religious communities, and vernacular audiences drew on shared repertoires while making them answer Vietnamese political, aesthetic, and social needs. The study contributes a concise model for analyzing cultural agency and for avoiding reductive heritage labels.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Historical studies show that engagement with Chinese models coexisted with Vietnamese political difference. Woodside (1971) demonstrates that nineteenth-century Vietnamese

government adapted rather than mechanically duplicated Qing institutions, while Taylor (2013) places such adaptations within a longer history of changing Vietnamese identities. Art-historical scholarship similarly presents Vietnamese art as part of intersecting mainland and maritime networks rather than an isolated derivative tradition (Stevenson & Guy, 1997; Tingley, 2009; Nguyễn-Long, 2013).

Material studies offer more specific evidence. Research on Đại Việt ceramics identifies technological and iconographic connections with China but also independent kiln organization, glaze choices, official patronage, and participation in regional trade (Le, 2026). Archaeological materials from Thăng Long contain locally made wares together with imported objects, indicating that the capital was a site of selection and synthesis (Nguyễn, 2011; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). Court-commissioned porcelain is even more complex: objects fired in Chinese kilns could embody Vietnamese reign titles, poems, motifs, and courtly requirements (Trần, 2018). Folk painting provides a vernacular parallel. Although Vietnamese prints share techniques and auspicious themes with Chinese *minjian nianhua*, they form an independent tradition shaped by local lifestyles and religious practices (Chomg, 2010).

The conceptual framework combines transculturation, hybridity, representation, and critical heritage studies. Ortiz (1995) and Bhabha (1994) describe cultural contact as producing negotiated forms rather than preserving pure origins. Hall (1997) emphasizes that representation creates meaning, while Smith (2006) shows that heritage discourse distributes authority by deciding whose interpretation becomes official. Accordingly, the term “Chinese-associated repertoire” is used when evidence demonstrates connection to Chinese visual systems but does not establish a single, exclusive origin. This wording recognizes shared circulation without erasing Vietnamese agency.

3. Materials and Methods

The study uses qualitative visual-cultural analysis informed by Rose’s (2016) attention to production, composition, circulation, and reception. It examines representative domains for which historical and material evidence is available: dynastic iconography, glazed ceramics, *đồ sứ ký kiểu* (court-commissioned porcelain), folk prints, and architectural ornament.

Sources include peer-reviewed studies, scholarly catalogues, a doctoral dissertation, archaeological publications, and official heritage documentation.

Analysis proceeded in three steps. First, each domain was situated within a channel of circulation such as court exchange, religion, trade, technical transfer, or popular practice. Second, the study compared changes in form, material, inscription, patronage, function, and setting. Third, those changes were interpreted through five localization operations: formal adaptation, material translation, functional recontextualization, semantic rearticulation, and institutional appropriation.

Evidence was included only when the source identified a datable object group, production context, inscription, material feature, documented use, or institutional setting. Visual resemblance by itself was not treated as proof of direct transmission. Where the available literature could not establish a single origin, the analysis used qualified terms such as “associated,” “shared,” or “transregional.” The study does not claim to catalogue all Vietnamese visual arts; it proposes an interpretive model based on selected, well-documented cases.

4. Findings

4.1 Dynastic Imagery and Architectural Space

Dragons, phoenixes, clouds, waves, lotus petals, auspicious characters, and cosmological arrangements circulated widely in East Asia. In Vietnam, their use was regulated by dynastic context and local aesthetics. The Lý dragon, commonly represented through an elongated, fluid body and rhythmic movement, differs from heavier imperial formulas even while participating in a shared symbolic language. Such variation is not merely decorative. It allowed Vietnamese rulers to employ recognizable signs of sovereignty while visually distinguishing their own courtly order (Nguyễn-Long, 2013; Tingley, 2009).

Architectural placement further transformed meaning. Cloud-and-wave motifs on a palace, pagoda, communal house, or tomb did not perform the same function. They could connect royal authority with cosmic order, frame Buddhist sacred space, invoke rain and fertility, or protect a village community. Local timber construction, carving traditions, ceramic roof decoration, and cycles of repair also changed how motifs appeared. Architecture therefore combines formal adaptation with functional and semantic recontextualization. The layered

history of Thăng Long, where local, Chinese, Chamic, and other materials intersected, illustrates why Vietnamese visual culture cannot be explained through a single bilateral line of transmission (Nguyễn, 2011; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

4.2 Ceramics and Material Translation

Ceramics provide especially strong evidence that stylistic connection does not equal technical dependency. Vietnamese potters worked with technologies and decorative conventions associated with Chinese ceramics, but local clay bodies, kiln conditions, glaze chemistry, tools, and markets altered the results. Incised lotus petals, molded relief, celadon surfaces, iron-brown painting, and underglaze decoration acquired different visual rhythms when produced within Vietnamese workshops. Studies of Đại Việt ceramics identify parallels with Chinese development while also documenting official kilns, imperial patronage, diverse glaze types, and the capacity to supply regional markets (Le, 2026; Stevenson & Guy, 1997).

The archaeological assemblage at Thăng Long reinforces this distinction. Imported Chinese ceramics existed beside locally produced wares and objects from other regional networks. Such coexistence indicates consumption and comparison, but also local production and choice. Vietnamese ceramics subsequently circulated outward through maritime trade, so localization was not the endpoint of movement. A form could be adapted in Vietnam and then become a new transregional reference. Material translation thus highlights artisans and workshops as active historical agents rather than anonymous transmitters.

4.3 Court-Commissioned Porcelain and Distributed Authorship

Đồ sứ ký kiểu offers the clearest example of institutional appropriation. Vietnamese courts commissioned porcelain from Chinese kilns, yet specified features such as reign marks, inscriptions, poems, motifs, and intended ceremonial use (Trần, 2018). These objects separate several dimensions that are often collapsed under a single national label. Manufacture was Chinese, but patronage, design criteria, political function, and reception could be Vietnamese.

Localization in this case began before the object arrived in Vietnam. Vietnamese requirements shaped production at the commissioning stage, producing a form of distributed authorship across borders. Describing the objects only as Chinese porcelain is materially correct but culturally incomplete; describing them only as Vietnamese also obscures the expertise and location of manufacture. Layered attribution is therefore essential: place of production, commissioning authority, design input, inscriptions, use, and later collection history should be identified separately.

4.4 Folk Prints and Vernacular Recontextualization

Vietnamese folk prints show localization beyond courtly institutions. Đông Hồ, Hàng Trống, and Sinh traditions share some printing methods, New Year functions, protective figures, auspicious animals, and moral themes with Chinese popular prints. Nevertheless, their materials, palettes, composition, humor, and audiences are locally distinctive. Đông Hồ prints used locally prepared paper and pigments and frequently represented village labor, children, festivals, satire, and domestic aspirations. Hàng Trống prints developed a different urban and devotional aesthetic, while Sinh prints were closely connected to ritual use.

These traditions demonstrate that meaning is reorganized through everyday practice. A shared auspicious theme became Vietnamese when it entered local homes, markets, festivals, educational customs, and religious ceremonies. Chong (2010) consequently characterizes Vietnamese folk painting as an independent tradition despite extensive Chinese influence. This evidence also cautions against inferring direct borrowing from visual resemblance alone: parallel needs, shared religious vocabularies, and regional circulation may all produce similar themes.

5. Discussion

Across the five domains, localization occurred through interconnected operations. Formal adaptation altered contour, scale, composition, and rhythm. Material translation changed a repertoire through local clay, glaze, pigment, paper, timber, and technical practice. Functional recontextualization assigned new ceremonial, domestic, commercial, or protective uses. Semantic rearticulation linked forms to Vietnamese dynastic memory, village prosperity, Buddhist devotion, or local moral narratives. Institutional appropriation

occurred when courts, temples, workshops, or communities controlled commissioning and interpretation. A motif could undergo several operations at once.

This model explains why visual similarity is an inadequate measure of dependency. A commissioned porcelain vessel may change little in physical form yet be strongly localized through patronage, inscription, and ritual use. Conversely, a motif may look distinct because of local materials even while preserving a transregional symbolic function. Analysis should therefore ask not only where a form was first documented, but who selected it, who made it, under what constraints, for which audience, and with what meaning.

The framework also clarifies cultural agency under asymmetrical relations. Vietnam–China interaction involved unequal political power and prestige, and localization should not romanticize those inequalities. However, asymmetry did not determine a single artistic outcome. Vietnamese courts used shared symbols to assert sovereignty; potters reorganized transferred knowledge into independent production; and communities embedded transregional imagery in local religious and domestic life. Agency appeared through transformation, not only through rejection.

These findings have implications for heritage interpretation. Labels such as “Chinese style” or “Chinese influence” may be appropriate when supported by evidence, but they should not stand as complete explanations. Museum and catalogue descriptions should distinguish manufacture, technology, design, patronage, function, and later interpretation. They should also state uncertainty where motifs belong to a wider East Asian or Buddhist repertoire. Such layered attribution produces greater historical precision and representational fairness without replacing scholarship with nationalist claims.

Representational fairness is especially important in asymmetrical cultural relationships. Naming only the most powerful or best-documented source can make smaller cultural actors appear merely receptive, even when evidence shows local commissioning, technical experimentation, or ritual reinterpretation. At the same time, localization should not be used to deny historical connections or claim exclusive ownership of shared forms. A responsible account holds both propositions together: Chinese connections were

substantial, and Vietnamese actors actively transformed them. This balanced formulation is more defensible than either dependency narratives or claims of untouched cultural purity.

The study is limited by its reliance on published and publicly documented materials and by the breadth of the domains examined. Object-level technical analysis, comparative measurements, workshop histories, and field studies at temples and communal houses would allow the proposed framework to be tested more rigorously. Its present value lies in providing a compact set of questions that can guide such research.

6. Conclusion

Chinese-associated repertoires were deeply present in Vietnamese visual arts, but presence did not amount to passive reproduction. Dynastic emblems, ceramics, commissioned porcelain, folk prints, and architectural ornament were altered through Vietnamese materials, patronage, ritual practices, political claims, and vernacular expectations. Their histories are therefore relational and layered rather than reducible to either pure origin or complete independence.

The article's main contribution is a five-operation model of localization that separates formal adaptation, material translation, functional recontextualization, semantic rearticulation, and institutional appropriation. This model makes cultural agency visible even when outward form remains similar. For art history and heritage practice, the practical implication is to replace single-source labels with layered attribution: acknowledge Chinese connections where evidence supports them while also identifying the Vietnamese actors and contexts that transformed those connections into locally meaningful visual culture.

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