

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Cultural Encoding–Decoding Approach to The Preservation of Traditional Vietnamese Tuồng Theatre

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Abstract

Traditional Vietnamese Tuồng theatre represents one of Vietnam's most sophisticated forms of classical performing arts, integrating dramaturgy, choreography, music, costume symbolism, martial aesthetics, and philosophical values into a unified semiotic system. Despite its historical significance, Tuồng faces increasing challenges associated with modernization, declining audiences, changing cultural consumption patterns, and the gradual disappearance of traditional performance knowledge. Existing preservation initiatives have largely concentrated on documentation, performance reconstruction, and institutional conservation, while comparatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding Tuồng choreography as a structured communicative system capable of transmitting cultural knowledge through encoded symbolic movements. This article proposes a cultural encoding–decoding approach that interprets Tuồng choreography through semiotic theory to strengthen preservation strategies. Drawing exclusively upon established scholarship in semiotics, theatre studies, and Tuồng research, the study synthesizes Roland Barthes' theory of signification, Vietnamese literary semiotics, theatrical semiotics, and traditional Tuồng scholarship to construct an analytical framework for preserving choreographic knowledge. The research adopts a qualitative review methodology combined with conceptual synthesis to examine how bodily movement, gesture, martial patterns, spatial organization, costumes, and actor-audience interaction collectively function as interconnected signs within Tuồng performances. The findings indicate that choreography should be preserved not merely as physical movement but as a dynamic system of cultural codes requiring contextual interpretation for effective intergenerational transmission. The study further demonstrates that integrating encoding–decoding principles into preservation practices can improve documentation accuracy, educational methodologies, and digital archiving while maintaining cultural authenticity. The proposed framework contributes to heritage conservation by repositioning Tuồng choreography as a living semiotic archive rather than a collection of isolated performance techniques.

KEY WORDS

Tuồng theatre; cultural preservation; encoding–decoding; semiotics; choreography; performance studies; Vietnamese traditional theatre; cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Traditional Vietnamese Tuồng theatre occupies a distinctive position within Southeast Asian performing arts because of its comprehensive integration of literary narratives, symbolic movement, martial choreography, stylized vocal expression, elaborate costumes, and ritualized performance conventions. Unlike forms of theatre that prioritize realism, Tuồng communicates meaning primarily through codified systems of representation. Every gesture, facial expression, costume element, movement sequence, weapon manipulation, and stage position functions as an intentional sign that conveys historical identity, ethical values, emotional states, political authority, or philosophical principles. Consequently, audiences familiar with Tuồng traditions interpret performances by decoding layers of symbolic meaning rather than relying solely upon verbal dialogue.

The preservation of Tuồng has traditionally emphasized safeguarding scripts, musical compositions, costumes, and performance repertoires. While these components remain essential, choreography has often received comparatively less systematic analytical attention despite serving as one of the principal carriers of cultural information. Choreographic movements in Tuồng are neither decorative nor purely aesthetic. Instead, they operate within a highly structured communicative system in which bodily actions encode historical narratives, social hierarchy, military discipline, moral ideals, and collective memory (Hoàng Chương, 1998).

Semiotics provides an appropriate theoretical perspective for understanding this complexity because it examines how signs produce meaning within cultural systems. Roland Barthes' conception of signification demonstrates that cultural objects communicate through multiple layers of meaning extending beyond their immediate physical appearance (Barthes, 2002). Applied to Tuồng choreography, this perspective suggests that performance movements should not be viewed simply as artistic techniques but rather as interconnected cultural codes requiring systematic interpretation and preservation. Such an approach transforms choreography from an ephemeral physical practice into a durable cultural language capable of transmitting heritage across generations.

The relationship between choreography and cultural communication becomes increasingly important as Vietnamese society undergoes rapid modernization.

Contemporary audiences often encounter Tuồng without possessing traditional interpretive knowledge, reducing their ability to decode symbolic performance elements accurately. Consequently, preserving movement alone cannot guarantee preservation of meaning. Effective conservation therefore requires simultaneous documentation of encoded cultural information and mechanisms through which audiences interpret these symbols.

1.2 Problem Statement

The principal challenge confronting traditional Vietnamese Tuồng is not merely declining performance frequency but the gradual erosion of interpretive competence among performers, educators, and audiences. Although numerous preservation initiatives have documented scripts, costumes, and musical traditions, choreographic knowledge frequently remains transmitted through oral instruction and apprenticeship. Such transmission models become increasingly vulnerable as experienced performers retire and fewer young practitioners pursue long-term professional training (Hoàng Chương, 2006).

Furthermore, many preservation projects emphasize recording visible movements without systematically documenting the cultural meanings embedded within those movements. This creates an incomplete archival record because choreography derives its significance from symbolic interpretation rather than mechanical execution alone. A recorded gesture loses substantial cultural value if future performers cannot understand why it is performed, what historical references it embodies, or how audiences traditionally decode its significance.

Another challenge concerns the fragmentation of theoretical approaches. Theatre studies often examine performance aesthetics, whereas cultural preservation initiatives prioritize heritage management. Semiotic scholarship investigates systems of meaning but rarely applies encoding-decoding concepts comprehensively to Vietnamese choreographic traditions. Consequently, an interdisciplinary framework capable of integrating performance analysis with semiotic interpretation remains insufficiently developed.

The absence of such a framework limits the effectiveness of preservation policies because documentation strategies frequently overlook relationships between movement, symbolism, audience interpretation, and cultural identity.

1.3 Research Relevance

The relevance of this research extends across cultural preservation, theatre studies, semiotics, and heritage management. Contemporary preservation increasingly recognizes intangible cultural heritage as dynamic knowledge systems rather than static historical artifacts. Within this perspective, Tuồng choreography represents a sophisticated communicative practice through which historical memory and cultural values continue to circulate.

Semiotic analysis offers methodological advantages by explaining how symbolic movement generates meaning through culturally established codes. Barthes argues that cultural signs function through multiple levels of signification, allowing ordinary physical forms to communicate complex ideological and cultural meanings (Barthes, 2002). Applying this principle enables researchers to investigate Tuồng choreography as an organized language composed of interconnected symbolic units rather than isolated artistic movements.

Vietnamese semiotic scholarship similarly emphasizes that literary and artistic communication depends upon culturally shared interpretive systems (Trịnh Bá Đĩnh, 2023). This insight becomes particularly relevant for traditional theatre because performers encode meanings that audiences decode through established conventions. Preserving these conventions therefore becomes equally important as preserving physical performance techniques.

Moreover, theatrical semiotics recognizes stage performance as an integrated network of visual, auditory, spatial, and bodily signs (Fischer-Lichte, 1997). Tuồng exemplifies this principle through its synthesis of choreography, music, costume, facial makeup, props, and vocal performance into unified communicative structures. Understanding choreography within this broader semiotic environment provides opportunities for more comprehensive preservation methodologies.

The research also contributes to contemporary discussions regarding digital heritage documentation. Digital archives increasingly record performance movements through video technologies; however, without systematic semiotic interpretation such archives risk becoming repositories of movement divorced from cultural meaning. The proposed encoding-decoding framework addresses this limitation by emphasizing documentation of symbolic relationships

alongside physical choreography.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study pursues five primary objectives.

First, it examines Tuồng choreography as a structured semiotic system through which cultural meanings are encoded into bodily movement.

Second, it synthesizes theoretical perspectives from semiotics, theatrical studies, and Vietnamese cultural scholarship to establish an integrated analytical framework for choreographic preservation.

Third, it investigates relationships between performers' encoding processes and audiences' decoding practices within traditional Tuồng performance.

Fourth, it evaluates how semiotic interpretation can improve contemporary documentation, education, and digital preservation strategies.

Finally, it proposes a conceptual preservation model capable of maintaining both the physical and symbolic dimensions of Tuồng choreography.

1.5 Scope and Significance

The scope of this article is confined to conceptual and theoretical analysis based exclusively upon the provided scholarly references. Rather than conducting ethnographic fieldwork or quantitative audience studies, the research develops an interdisciplinary review integrating semiotics, theatre studies, and Vietnamese Tuồng scholarship into a coherent preservation framework.

The significance of the research lies in several contributions.

Academically, it expands semiotic applications within Southeast Asian performance studies by positioning Tuồng choreography as an organized cultural language. Existing scholarship has explored theatrical symbolism and Vietnamese traditional performance independently, yet fewer studies have integrated these perspectives into a unified encoding-decoding model.

Methodologically, the article demonstrates how qualitative conceptual synthesis can generate preservation frameworks applicable to intangible cultural heritage. Instead of documenting isolated movements, researchers may analyze relationships among choreography, symbolic meaning, historical context, and audience interpretation.

Practically, the proposed framework supports cultural institutions responsible for heritage conservation. Museums, theatrical academies, digital archives, and educational organizations may benefit from documentation models that preserve both choreographic execution and encoded cultural significance simultaneously. Such approaches strengthen intergenerational knowledge transfer while maintaining authenticity.

Finally, the research contributes to broader heritage preservation discourse by arguing that traditional performance survives not simply through repeated performance but through successful transmission of symbolic literacy. Cultural continuity depends upon preserving systems of meaning alongside artistic practice. As Barthes' theory of signification demonstrates, cultural forms acquire enduring significance because communities collectively encode and decode symbolic structures across historical contexts (Barthes, 2002). Understanding Tuồng through this perspective provides a stronger theoretical foundation for sustainable preservation strategies capable of supporting future generations of performers, scholars, and audiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to the Literature

The preservation of traditional Vietnamese Tuồng theatre requires an interdisciplinary understanding of semiotics, theatrical communication, cultural heritage, and performance practice. The selected literature collectively demonstrates that Tuồng is not merely a theatrical genre but a sophisticated symbolic system in which movement, costume, dialogue, music, stage space, and martial choreography function as interconnected signs. Rather than viewing choreography as a sequence of physical actions, the reviewed works indicate that it should be interpreted as a cultural language whose meanings are constructed through encoding by performers and decoding by audiences.

The references provided represent four complementary scholarly perspectives. Roland Barthes (2002) establishes the theoretical foundation of signification and cultural codes. Erika Fischer-Lichte (1997) extends semiotic inquiry into theatrical performance. Vietnamese scholars including Trịnh Bá Đình (2023) and Lê Huy Bắc (2019) contextualize semiotics within Vietnamese literary and cultural studies. Hoàng Chương's works (1998; 2006; Tuồng and Martial Arts) and Từ Thành Bắc (2013) contribute historical and practical insights into

traditional theatre and choreographic performance. Together, these studies provide the conceptual basis for developing an encoding–decoding framework for Tuồng preservation.

2.2 Semiotics as the Foundation of Cultural Communication

Semiotics investigates how signs produce meaning within social and cultural systems. Roland Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* remains one of the most influential theoretical works explaining how communication extends beyond language into broader cultural practices (Barthes, 2002). Barthes argues that cultural objects function simultaneously as physical entities and symbolic carriers of meaning. Every sign possesses both denotative and connotative dimensions, allowing audiences to interpret multiple layers of significance.

Applied to Tuồng theatre, this theoretical perspective suggests that choreography cannot be understood solely through observable movement. A raised sword, a circular walking pattern, or a stylized hand gesture does not merely represent physical action but communicates political authority, loyalty, heroism, emotional intensity, or ritual significance depending upon established cultural conventions.

Barthes further emphasizes that meaning emerges through systems of relationships rather than isolated signs. This principle is particularly valuable for Tuồng because choreography interacts continuously with costume, facial makeup, vocal delivery, music, stage position, and dramatic narrative. Individual movements acquire meaning through their position within an integrated symbolic structure rather than through independent interpretation (Barthes, 2002).

Another important contribution of Barthes lies in distinguishing between cultural production and cultural interpretation. Performers intentionally encode messages into symbolic performance, whereas audiences reconstruct these meanings through culturally learned interpretive frameworks. This encoding–decoding relationship forms the central theoretical basis for the present study and is revisited throughout the analysis because it explains how choreographic knowledge survives across generations.

2.3 Vietnamese Perspectives on Semiotic Theory

While Barthes provides universal theoretical principles, Vietnamese scholars adapt semiotic analysis to local literary and cultural traditions.

Lê Huy Bắc (2019) expands discussions of signs and intersemiotics by examining interactions among multiple

symbolic systems. Rather than treating literature, visual art, theatre, and movement independently, intersemiotic analysis investigates how meaning transfers across artistic media. This perspective is particularly applicable to Tuồng because theatrical communication integrates language, bodily movement, costume design, martial choreography, music, and visual symbolism into one performance.

The concept of intersemiotic interaction suggests that choreographic preservation should not isolate movement from accompanying artistic elements. For example, a martial sequence derives significance partly from costume color, rhythmic accompaniment, vocal expression, and dramatic context. Removing choreography from these interconnected signs risks reducing cultural meaning.

Trịnh Bá Đĩnh (2023) further develops Vietnamese literary semiotics by emphasizing that meaning emerges through historically established interpretive conventions. Cultural signs remain understandable because communities collectively preserve symbolic knowledge across generations.

This observation has important implications for heritage preservation. Documenting choreographic movements without documenting interpretive conventions creates incomplete archives. Future performers may reproduce physical movement accurately while misunderstanding its symbolic purpose. Consequently, preservation must include both visible performance and invisible cultural knowledge.

Together, Lê Huy Bắc (2019) and Trịnh Bá Đĩnh (2023) strengthen the theoretical argument that Tuồng choreography should be documented as a culturally embedded sign system rather than as an isolated artistic technique.

2.4 Semiotics of Theatre and Performance

Erika Fischer-Lichte (1997) extends semiotic theory into theatrical performance by conceptualizing theatre as an integrated communicative environment composed of multiple simultaneous sign systems. Unlike literary texts, theatre communicates through bodies, movement, sound, costume, stage design, lighting, props, gesture, and audience interaction.

This multidimensional perspective closely corresponds with Tuồng performance practice.

Within Tuồng, choreography does not function independently from dramatic expression. Bodily movement interacts continuously with vocal delivery, costume symbolism, painted

facial designs, rhythmic percussion, stage positioning, and martial techniques. Every theatrical element contributes to meaning construction.

Fischer-Lichte further argues that theatrical meaning emerges dynamically during performance through interaction between performers and audiences. Audiences actively decode symbolic information based upon shared cultural competence rather than passively observing movement.

This principle explains one of the principal challenges confronting contemporary Tuồng preservation. As younger audiences become less familiar with traditional symbolic conventions, decoding competence gradually weakens. Consequently, identical performances may communicate substantially different meanings across generations despite maintaining identical choreography.

Theatrical semiotics therefore shifts preservation priorities from merely recording performances toward sustaining interpretive communities capable of understanding symbolic codes.

2.5 Hoàng Chương's Contributions to Tuồng Studies

Among the provided references, Hoàng Chương offers the most comprehensive examination of Tuồng itself.

Mịch Quang – A Veteran Tuồng General (1998) presents historical perspectives on major artistic figures whose performances shaped the evolution of Vietnamese traditional theatre. Beyond documenting individual careers, the work illustrates how artistic knowledge has historically been transmitted through apprenticeship and performance practice.

The emphasis on master performers demonstrates that Tuồng preservation has depended largely upon embodied knowledge rather than written documentation. Choreographic expertise survives through repeated observation, imitation, correction, and cultural interpretation.

In *Issues in Traditional Theatre* (2006), Hoàng Chương broadens discussion toward institutional and artistic challenges affecting traditional performance. Modernization, changing entertainment preferences, declining performer recruitment, and educational transformation collectively threaten long-term continuity.

Importantly, Hoàng Chương suggests that preservation should extend beyond conserving historical artifacts toward sustaining living performance traditions. This position aligns closely with contemporary heritage theory emphasizing

intangible cultural practices rather than static museum collections.

Tuồng and Martial Arts further demonstrates the inseparable relationship between martial movement and theatrical symbolism. Martial choreography within Tuồng serves expressive rather than purely combative functions.

Sword movements symbolize justice.

Footwork represents military discipline.

Weapon handling communicates social hierarchy.

Spatial movement reflects strategic thinking.

Body posture signifies moral character.

These observations indicate that choreography functions simultaneously as physical technique and symbolic communication. Preserving movement therefore requires preserving encoded cultural meanings associated with martial aesthetics.

2.6 Comparative Perspective: Chinese Peking Opera and Tuồng

Từ Thành Bắc (2013) provides comparative insight through the study of Chinese Peking Opera. Although Tuồng possesses a distinct Vietnamese identity, historical exchanges between East Asian theatrical traditions reveal similarities in symbolic movement, costume conventions, stylized acting, and martial choreography.

The comparison highlights several important observations.

First, both traditions employ codified movement vocabularies rather than naturalistic acting.

Second, audiences interpret theatrical signs through culturally acquired knowledge rather than literal realism.

Third, choreographic precision functions as both aesthetic discipline and symbolic communication.

However, comparative analysis also emphasizes that Vietnamese Tuồng has developed unique cultural meanings reflecting Vietnamese historical experience, political identity, and indigenous artistic evolution.

Consequently, preservation efforts should avoid treating Tuồng merely as a regional variation of other Asian theatres. Instead, comparative scholarship illustrates broader semiotic principles while reinforcing the need to document uniquely Vietnamese symbolic codes.

2.7 Comparative Analysis of the Literature

Despite differing disciplinary perspectives, the reviewed works demonstrate several significant areas of convergence.

First, all authors recognize that performance communicates through structured symbolic systems rather than spontaneous expression.

Second, meaning depends upon culturally established interpretive conventions shared between performers and audiences.

Third, theatrical communication involves interaction among multiple artistic elements rather than isolated components.

Nevertheless, important differences also emerge.

Barthes (2002) develops general principles applicable across cultural communication but does not specifically address theatrical choreography.

Fischer-Lichte (1997) applies semiotics directly to theatre yet provides relatively limited discussion of Vietnamese performance traditions.

Lê Huy Bắc (2019) and Trịnh Bá Đình (2023) localize semiotic theory within Vietnamese intellectual contexts but focus primarily upon literature and sign systems rather than choreographic preservation.

Hoàng Chương's works provide rich historical and practical knowledge concerning Tuồng yet devote comparatively less attention to systematic semiotic modeling.

Từ Thành Bắc (2013) contributes comparative theatrical perspectives but emphasizes historical development rather than preservation methodology.

These complementary strengths indicate substantial opportunities for theoretical integration.

2.8 Identification of Research Gaps

The literature reveals several research gaps directly motivating the present study.

The first gap concerns the absence of an integrated encoding-decoding framework specifically designed for Tuồng choreography. Existing studies discuss signs, theatrical symbolism, and traditional performance independently but rarely synthesize them into one preservation model.

The second gap involves documentation methodology. Most scholarship recognizes choreography as culturally significant

but provides limited guidance regarding systematic recording of symbolic meanings alongside physical movement.

A third gap concerns audience interpretation. While theatrical semiotics emphasizes decoding processes, relatively little attention has been devoted to preserving audience interpretive competence as an essential component of intangible heritage.

The fourth gap involves digital preservation. Existing literature largely predates contemporary digital documentation technologies or discusses them only indirectly. Consequently, theoretical principles guiding digital archiving of symbolic choreography remain underdeveloped.

Finally, interdisciplinary integration remains limited. Semiotics, theatre studies, cultural preservation, and Tuồng scholarship frequently develop independently despite addressing closely related research questions.

2.9 Theoretical Positioning of the Present Study

Building upon these scholarly contributions, the present research positions Tuồng choreography as an integrated cultural communication system governed by encoding–decoding relationships.

The study adopts Barthes' theory of signification as the principal conceptual foundation because it explains how cultural meanings become encoded within symbolic forms and subsequently decoded by interpretive communities (Barthes, 2002). This theoretical perspective is strengthened by Vietnamese semiotic scholarship (Lê Huy Bắc, 2019; Trịnh Bá Đình, 2023), theatrical semiotics (Fischer-Lichte, 1997), and Tuồng-specific performance research (Hoàng Chương, 1998; Hoàng Chương, 2006; Tuồng and Martial Arts).

Rather than viewing preservation as simple documentation, the study conceptualizes preservation as maintaining the complete communicative cycle comprising symbolic encoding, performance transmission, audience decoding, cultural interpretation, and intergenerational knowledge continuity.

Within this framework, choreography is understood as a living archive whose cultural significance depends equally upon physical execution and symbolic comprehension. By integrating the complementary insights of the reviewed literature, the present research establishes a theoretical foundation for a more comprehensive approach to preserving traditional Vietnamese Tuồng theatre.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual review methodology supported by an interdisciplinary analytical framework. Rather than conducting empirical fieldwork, surveys, or experimental investigations, the research systematically synthesizes the theoretical perspectives presented in the selected references to develop a publication-oriented framework for preserving traditional Vietnamese Tuồng theatre through an encoding–decoding perspective.

A conceptual research design is appropriate because the principal objective is not to measure performance outcomes statistically but to explain how choreographic knowledge functions as a structured cultural communication system. The methodology therefore emphasizes theoretical integration, comparative interpretation, and model development based exclusively on the provided scholarly literature.

The review combines three complementary academic domains:

1. Semiotic theory
2. Theatre and performance studies
3. Vietnamese traditional Tuồng scholarship

Integrating these disciplines enables the research to explain choreography simultaneously as physical performance, symbolic communication, and cultural heritage.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The study is grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy, which assumes that cultural meaning is socially constructed through shared symbolic systems rather than existing as objective physical reality.

Within Tuồng theatre, movements possess significance because performers and audiences collectively recognize established performance conventions. A sword movement, for example, does not inherently signify loyalty or justice. Instead, these meanings emerge through historical cultural agreement and theatrical tradition.

This philosophical position aligns closely with Barthes' understanding of cultural signs, where meaning is produced through systems of signification rather than material objects themselves (Barthes, 2002). Likewise, Vietnamese literary semiotics emphasizes that interpretation depends upon

historically developed symbolic conventions (Trịnh Bá Đĩnh, 2023).

Consequently, preservation cannot focus exclusively on physical documentation. It must also preserve the interpretive knowledge through which symbolic meanings become understandable.

3.3 Research Approach

The investigation follows an inductive analytical approach.

Instead of beginning with predetermined hypotheses, the research examines existing theoretical knowledge concerning semiotics, theatrical communication, and Tuồng performance before constructing a generalized preservation framework.

The analytical progression consists of four sequential stages:

Stage One: Examination of semiotic principles explaining cultural encoding and signification.

Stage Two: Analysis of theatrical communication and symbolic performance systems.

Stage Three: Interpretation of Tuồng choreography using traditional Vietnamese theatre scholarship.

Stage Four: Development of an integrated encoding–decoding preservation framework.

This progression ensures that the proposed model emerges logically from existing scholarship rather than speculative assumptions.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation consists of four interconnected components.

3.4.1 Semiotic Signification

The first component derives from Barthes' theory of signification.

According to Barthes (2002), cultural communication operates through structured systems of signs. Every sign contains a visible expression and an associated cultural meaning. More importantly, meanings develop through relationships among signs rather than isolated symbols.

Applied to Tuồng choreography:

- Physical movement represents the signifier.
- Cultural interpretation represents the signified.

- Complete performance produces cultural meaning.

This relationship forms the first layer of the preservation framework.

3.4.2 Intersemiotic Communication

The second component originates from Vietnamese intersemiotic studies.

Lê Huy Bắc (2019) argues that artistic communication rarely depends upon one symbolic medium alone. Instead, multiple sign systems cooperate to produce unified meaning.

Within Tuồng this includes:

- Choreography
- Costume
- Facial makeup
- Music
- Stage movement
- Dialogue
- Martial techniques

None of these elements functions independently.

The preservation model therefore treats choreography as one component within a larger symbolic ecosystem.

3.4.3 Theatre Semiotics

Fischer-Lichte (1997) conceptualizes theatre as a multidimensional communication process involving performers, stage space, objects, sounds, and audiences.

Unlike written literature, theatrical meaning changes continuously during live performance.

This insight contributes an important methodological principle:

Preservation should document not only choreography itself but also its interaction with surrounding theatrical elements.

3.4.4 Cultural Heritage Transmission

The fourth component derives primarily from Hoàng Chương's studies of Tuồng.

Traditional Tuồng has historically transmitted knowledge through apprenticeship rather than standardized written manuals (Hoàng Chương, 1998; Hoàng Chương, 2006).

Consequently, preserving choreography requires preserving:

- technical movement,
- symbolic explanation,
- historical context,
- performance conventions,
- audience interpretation.

This principle becomes the foundation of the proposed preservation model.

3.5 Analytical Framework of Cultural Encoding–Decoding

Based upon synthesis of the literature, the study proposes a five-stage analytical framework.

Stage 1: Cultural Encoding

Historical knowledge becomes encoded into performance.

This includes:

- ethical values,
- historical memory,
- military discipline,
- royal symbolism,
- philosophical concepts,
- social hierarchy.

The encoding process transforms abstract cultural ideas into performable movement.

Stage 2: Choreographic Representation

Encoded meanings become embodied through choreography.

Examples include:

- stylized walking,
- circular movement,
- martial sequences,
- sword choreography,
- symbolic gestures,
- body orientation,
- spatial positioning.

These movements function as communicative symbols rather than realistic actions.

Stage 3: Performance Integration

Choreography combines with additional theatrical elements.

These include:

- costume
- facial makeup
- vocal performance
- percussion
- dramatic dialogue
- stage rhythm

Meaning emerges from their interaction rather than any individual component.

Stage 4: Audience Decoding

Audiences interpret symbolic performance using cultural knowledge.

Successful decoding depends upon:

- historical familiarity,
- theatrical literacy,
- cultural experience,
- symbolic competence.

If decoding competence declines, cultural meaning gradually disappears despite continued performance.

Stage 5: Heritage Preservation

Decoded knowledge returns to society through:

- education,
- documentation,
- archival preservation,
- performer training,
- academic research,
- community participation.

The cycle then repeats through future generations.

This cyclical process transforms preservation into an ongoing communication system rather than a one-time documentation activity.

3.6 Components of Choreographic Encoding

The framework identifies six primary categories of encoded information within Tuồng choreography.

A. Historical Encoding

Movement preserves historical memory.

Military marches, ceremonial gestures, and royal entrances communicate specific historical traditions rather than generalized theatrical movement.

B. Ethical Encoding

Body posture frequently symbolizes virtue.

Straight posture represents integrity.

Controlled movement reflects discipline.

Measured pacing signifies wisdom.

Aggressive movement may symbolize justice rather than violence.

C. Political Encoding

Royal characters perform differently from military generals.

Officials move differently from servants.

Status becomes visible through choreographic vocabulary.

D. Martial Encoding

Martial choreography communicates:

- courage,
- strategic intelligence,
- authority,
- honor,
- battlefield discipline.

As emphasized in Tuồng and Martial Arts, combat movement possesses expressive rather than practical objectives.

E. Emotional Encoding

Unlike realistic theatre, Tuồng employs stylized movement to communicate emotional states.

Examples include:

- restrained grief,
- controlled anger,
- ceremonial respect,

- heroic confidence.

Movement becomes symbolic rather than psychological realism.

F. Spiritual Encoding

Traditional performances frequently contain ritual elements reflecting respect for ancestors, cultural continuity, and moral philosophy.

These dimensions require preservation because they cannot be inferred merely from recorded movement.

3.7 Decoding Mechanisms

The study identifies four mechanisms through which audiences interpret choreographic meaning.

Cultural Knowledge

Audience members recognize historically established conventions.

Without this knowledge, symbolic gestures lose communicative effectiveness.

Contextual Interpretation

Movement gains meaning from surrounding dramatic events.

Identical gestures may communicate different meanings depending upon narrative context.

Visual Association

Costume, facial makeup, and props reinforce choreographic interpretation.

Audiences decode complete visual compositions rather than isolated movement.

Collective Memory

Communities preserve symbolic understanding through repeated cultural participation.

Declining participation therefore weakens decoding ability over time.

3.8 Proposed Preservation Model

The study proposes an integrated preservation model comprising six interconnected stages.

Preservation Stage	Primary Objective	Expected Outcome
Documentation	Record choreography	Permanent archive
Semiotic Annotation	Explain symbolic meaning	Cultural interpretation

Preservation Stage	Primary Objective	Expected Outcome
Historical Mapping	Link movement with tradition	Context preservation
Performer Education	Teach encoding principles	Authentic performance
Audience Education	Improve decoding competence	Cultural continuity
Digital Heritage Archive	Integrate multimedia documentation	Sustainable preservation

Unlike conventional archival methods, this model records both movement and meaning simultaneously.

3.9 Reliability of the Conceptual Framework

Although conceptual rather than empirical, reliability is strengthened through triangulation across multiple scholarly perspectives.

The framework integrates:

- Barthes' semiotic theory,
- Fischer-Lichte's theatre semiotics,
- Vietnamese literary semiotics,
- Tuồng scholarship,
- comparative theatrical studies.

Each theoretical component supports the others while addressing different dimensions of cultural communication.

3.10 Methodological Strengths

Several methodological strengths characterize the proposed approach.

First, it integrates previously separated academic disciplines into a unified preservation model.

Second, it emphasizes cultural meaning rather than mechanical documentation.

Third, it supports future digital preservation initiatives by providing interpretive metadata alongside audiovisual records.

Fourth, it remains applicable beyond Tuồng and may be adapted for other forms of intangible cultural heritage employing symbolic performance systems.

3.11 Methodological Limitations

The research also acknowledges several limitations.

Because the study is conceptual, findings depend upon interpretation of existing scholarship rather than direct observation of contemporary Tuồng performances.

The framework therefore requires empirical validation through performer interviews, rehearsal observation, audience interpretation studies, and digital archive implementation.

Furthermore, symbolic interpretation may vary across regional performance traditions and historical periods. Future investigations should examine how local performance communities negotiate continuity and change while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a rigorous theoretical foundation for integrating semiotics and cultural preservation into a comprehensive framework for safeguarding traditional Vietnamese Tuồng theatre.

4. RESULTS

The conceptual synthesis undertaken in this study demonstrates that Tuồng choreography should be understood as a structured cultural communication system rather than as a collection of stylized movements. Analysis of the selected literature reveals five principal findings. First, choreographic movement functions as a system of encoded cultural signs whose meanings are inseparable from historical, ethical, and theatrical contexts (Barthes, 2002; Hoàng Chương, 2006). Second, preservation strategies that record only physical movement risk losing the symbolic knowledge necessary for authentic performance reconstruction. Third, theatrical meaning is generated through the interaction of choreography with costume, music, stage space, facial makeup, and dramatic narrative, supporting an intersemiotic approach to documentation (Fischer-Lichte, 1997; Lê Huy Bắc, 2019). Fourth, audience interpretation is an essential component of heritage continuity because successful preservation depends not only on performers' ability to encode meaning but also on audiences' ability to decode it. Finally, the proposed encoding–decoding framework provides a systematic model for integrating documentation, interpretation, education, and digital preservation into a unified heritage strategy.

The analysis further indicates that Tuồng choreography contains multiple layers of encoded information. Individual

movements simultaneously communicate social hierarchy, emotional expression, military discipline, ritual practice, and philosophical values. This multilayered structure confirms Barthes' argument that cultural signs possess denotative and connotative dimensions that operate together within broader systems of signification (Barthes, 2002). Consequently, preserving isolated gestures without documenting their cultural associations provides only partial conservation of the artistic tradition.

Another significant finding concerns the role of performer training. Traditional apprenticeship has historically transmitted both movement and symbolic interpretation. As apprenticeship systems become less common, institutional education must compensate by explicitly teaching the cultural meanings underlying choreographic conventions. This suggests that preservation programs should incorporate semiotic literacy alongside technical performance instruction. Digital archives similarly require annotation describing historical context, symbolic function, and interpretive conventions rather than storing video recordings alone.

Comparative examination of Tuồng scholarship and theatrical semiotics also demonstrates that preservation should prioritize relationships among performance components instead of documenting each artistic element independently. Choreography acquires communicative significance through its interaction with costumes, musical rhythm, martial vocabulary, and dramatic structure. Therefore, integrated documentation methodologies more accurately represent the living nature of Tuồng performance than fragmented archival practices.

Overall, the findings support the central proposition that preserving Tuồng theatre requires conserving an entire communicative system in which encoding, performance, decoding, and cultural transmission remain inseparable processes.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that Tuồng choreography represents a sophisticated semiotic language rather than merely a performance technique. By integrating the perspectives of Barthes, Fischer-Lichte, Vietnamese semiotic scholars, and Tuồng specialists, the study demonstrates that preservation must move beyond material conservation toward safeguarding systems of cultural meaning. This interpretation is consistent with Barthes'

assertion that cultural artifacts derive significance from socially constructed codes rather than from their physical forms alone (Barthes, 2002). Applying this principle to Tuồng clarifies why identical movements may lose their cultural value when detached from historical and symbolic interpretation.

The proposed encoding-decoding framework contributes theoretically by connecting semiotic analysis with heritage preservation. Existing Tuồng scholarship documents performance traditions and artistic development, while theatre semiotics explains symbolic communication. The present synthesis combines these perspectives into a preservation model that treats choreography as an active medium of cultural transmission. Such integration addresses the research gap identified in the literature review and provides a conceptual basis for future empirical investigation.

From a practical perspective, the framework has implications for museums, theatre academies, cultural institutions, and digital heritage initiatives. Documentation projects should include descriptive metadata explaining symbolic meanings, historical references, performer intentions, and audience interpretation. Educational programs may also benefit from integrating semiotic analysis into performer training so that students understand not only how to execute choreographic patterns but also why those patterns communicate particular cultural values. Such an approach strengthens authenticity while facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The findings additionally suggest that audience education deserves greater attention within preservation policy. Heritage conservation is frequently performer-centered; however, theatrical communication requires informed audiences capable of decoding symbolic language. Public education, interpretive exhibitions, annotated performances, and multimedia resources may therefore become valuable components of sustainable preservation.

Despite these contributions, the proposed framework has limitations. As a conceptual study, it relies exclusively on theoretical synthesis rather than observational evidence. Regional variations within Tuồng traditions may also produce different symbolic interpretations that require localized analysis. Furthermore, cultural meanings evolve over time, creating tension between preserving historical authenticity and accommodating contemporary audiences. Future research should therefore validate the framework through ethnographic studies, performer interviews, audience reception analysis, and digital heritage implementation

projects. Such empirical work would refine the model while preserving its central principle that choreography and cultural meaning must be conserved together rather than separately.

6. CONCLUSION

Traditional Vietnamese Tuồng theatre represents a highly organized cultural communication system in which choreography performs far more than an aesthetic function. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of semiotics, theatrical studies, and Vietnamese scholarship, this article has demonstrated that choreographic movement serves as an encoded repository of historical memory, ethical principles, political symbolism, ritual practice, and artistic identity. The research argues that effective preservation depends upon maintaining the complete cycle of cultural encoding, theatrical performance, audience decoding, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

The proposed encoding–decoding framework extends existing preservation approaches by integrating symbolic interpretation with physical documentation. Rather than treating choreography as isolated movement, the framework conceptualizes it as a living semiotic archive whose significance emerges through interaction with costume, music, stage space, martial vocabulary, and audience competence. This perspective provides a stronger theoretical foundation for documenting intangible cultural heritage while supporting educational practice and digital archiving.

The study contributes to academic discourse by bridging semiotic theory and Vietnamese traditional theatre studies, thereby addressing an important conceptual gap within existing scholarship. It also offers practical guidance for heritage institutions seeking more comprehensive documentation strategies capable of preserving both performance techniques and the cultural meanings embedded within them.

Future investigations should empirically examine performer interpretation, audience decoding processes, regional choreographic variation, and technology-assisted heritage preservation. Such research would strengthen the applicability of the proposed model while ensuring that Tuồng continues to function as a dynamic cultural tradition rather than a static historical artifact.

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