



National Brand Positioning through Cultural Soft Power in the Context of Global Geopolitical Reconfiguration

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ABSTRACT: The reconfiguration of the global geopolitical order is broadening the meaning of national power beyond military and economic capabilities toward the capacity to generate attraction, credibility, cultural recognition, and durable international affinity. Against this background, cultural soft power has become increasingly important to national brand positioning, particularly for middle and emerging powers seeking to strengthen international influence without relying primarily on coercive resources. This study examines how Vietnam can position its national brand through cultural soft power amid intensifying geopolitical competition, digital transformation, and the growing strategic importance of cultural and creative industries. The study adopts a qualitative research design combining theoretical synthesis, policy-document analysis, comparative interpretation, and descriptive analysis of internationally recognized soft-power and heritage indicators. The analytical framework integrates soft power theory, nation branding and competitive identity, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, cultural industries, and international perception. The findings show that Vietnam possesses a substantial cultural resource base, including historical depth, diverse tangible and intangible heritage, distinctive cuisine, regional cultural diversity, cultural-tourism assets, traditional crafts, and growing creative capacity. In the Global Soft Power Index 2026, Vietnam ranks 52nd among 193 countries and 9th in Asia; it ranks 14th for “food the world loves,” while perceptions of a “rich heritage” improved to 49th. However, the study identifies a cultural soft-power conversion gap between the possession of attractive cultural resources and their transformation into internationally scalable national-brand value. Cultural assets remain fragmented across sectors, international storytelling is not yet sufficiently coordinated, globally competitive cultural brands remain limited, and stronger integration is required among cultural diplomacy, cultural industries, tourism, digital communication, community participation, and national branding. The study proposes an integrated Cultural Soft Power–National Brand Positioning Framework based on five strategic pillars: distinctive cultural identity, globally competitive cultural products, networked cultural diplomacy, digital narrative infrastructure, and international perception measurement. It argues that Vietnam should move from promoting individual cultural assets toward managing a coherent national cultural proposition capable of generating recognition, attraction, trust, economic value, and long-term geopolitical relevance.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Power in international relations has traditionally been associated with military capability, economic capacity, territorial resources, technological advantages, and the ability of states to impose costs or provide material incentives. However, the evolution of international politics demonstrates that national influence cannot be adequately explained by coercive resources alone. Nye (1990, 2004) conceptualizes soft power as the capacity to shape the preferences and behavior of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Culture, political values, and foreign policies regarded as legitimate constitute major sources of this form of power. Soft power therefore creates a strategic space in which states can strengthen influence by becoming attractive, credible, recognizable, and relevant to foreign publics rather than relying exclusively on material superiority.

The importance of attraction has become more pronounced as the international environment grows more fragmented, competitive, multipolar, and digitally mediated. Contemporary soft-power assessments indicate that global publics evaluate not only material capacity but also the consistency among a country's values, behavior, reputation, and delivered outcomes. In this environment, credibility, cultural engagement, international relationships, reputation, and the ability to communicate a distinctive national identity become strategic assets.

This transformation has important implications for middle and emerging powers. Countries without overwhelming military capabilities can still enhance their international standing by developing comparative advantages in culture, education, tourism, creativity, diplomacy, cuisine, heritage, media, and international networks. Cultural soft power is particularly relevant because culture can operate simultaneously as a symbolic resource, an economic asset, an instrument of public diplomacy, an experiential interface with foreign publics, and a source of national differentiation.

Nation branding provides a complementary perspective. Anholt (2007) argues that a country's international image cannot be sustainably constructed through advertising alone; it emerges from the interaction among policies, products, people, culture, tourism, investment, and international behavior. Dinnie (2008) similarly conceptualizes nation branding as the adaptation of brand identity, image, positioning, and stakeholder management to the national context. Fan (2010) further cautions that nations cannot be branded in the same way as commercial products and suggests understanding the process as the strategic management of national image and reputation. These perspectives imply that effective national brand positioning must be anchored in substantive national realities rather than promotional claims.

For Vietnam, the relationship among culture, soft power, and national positioning has become increasingly explicit at the policy level. Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW on the development of Vietnamese culture identifies culture and people as endogenous resources and calls for cultural values to become a form of national soft power. It also recognizes growing global competition over cultural values and cultural-industry influence and highlights the need to position Vietnam in a changing world order. By 2045, Vietnam aims to rank among the top three ASEAN countries and the top 30 countries globally in national soft power.

The policy architecture has recently been reinforced. Decision No. 2486/QĐ-TTg of 14 November 2025 approved the Strategy for the Development of Vietnam's Cultural Industries to 2030, with a vision to 2045. Decision No. 1306/QĐ-TTg of 17 July 2026 subsequently approved the Strategy for External Cultural Relations to 2030, with a vision to 2045. The latter explicitly links international cultural integration, cultural industries, international recognition, Vietnamese cultural centers abroad, tourism, and cultural communication with strengthening Vietnam's international standing and soft power.

External perception data provide an important empirical basis for examining this policy direction. According to the Global Soft Power Index 2026, Vietnam ranks 52nd among 193 countries and 9th in Asia. Its cultural advantages are particularly visible: Vietnam ranks 14th globally for "food the world loves," while its ranking for a "rich heritage" improved by nine positions to 49th. Vietnam is also perceived relatively positively for friendliness and continues to perform credibly in Culture & Heritage and Business & Trade (Brand Finance, 2026).

These results indicate both potential and a strategic problem. Vietnam possesses cultural attributes that perform considerably better than its overall soft-power position, but cultural attractiveness has not yet been fully converted into a correspondingly high national-brand position. This study defines this mismatch as a cultural soft-power conversion gap: the distance between possessing attractive cultural resources and transforming those resources into sustained international recognition, preference, reputation, economic value, and diplomatic influence.

Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions: (1) How does cultural soft power contribute to national brand positioning under conditions of global geopolitical reconfiguration? (2) What are the principal cultural assets, policy foundations, and conversion gaps shaping Vietnam's current national-brand position? (3) What strategic framework can enable Vietnam to transform cultural resources into a more coherent, internationally recognizable, and sustainable national brand?

The contribution of the study is twofold. Theoretically, it connects soft power, nation branding, cultural diplomacy, and cultural industries through a conversion-oriented analytical framework. Practically, it proposes a national cultural positioning model designed for Vietnam's emerging strategic environment.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Soft power and cultural attraction

Nye (1990) introduced soft power to explain forms of international influence that could not be reduced to military force or economic inducement. The concept was developed more systematically in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, where soft power is associated with the ability to attract and persuade through culture, political ideals, values, and policies regarded as legitimate (Nye, 2004).

Culture becomes a source of soft power when it is attractive to others rather than merely important to the society from which it originates. This distinction is analytically important. A cultural tradition may possess profound domestic historical significance but generate limited international influence if foreign publics do not encounter, understand, consume, experience, or identify with it. Cultural resources therefore become soft-power resources through processes of accessibility, interpretation, circulation, experience, and attraction.

The conversion process is neither automatic nor fully linear. International audiences interpret cultural products through their own cultural frames and may respond differently across geographical, generational, and social groups. Cultural attraction may also weaken when a gap emerges between communicated narratives and actual experience. Soft power therefore depends not simply on cultural possession but also on credibility and reception.

The conversion from cultural resources to influence can be summarized in Figure 1.

CONVERSION PROCESS FROM CULTURAL RESOURCES TO INFLUENCE

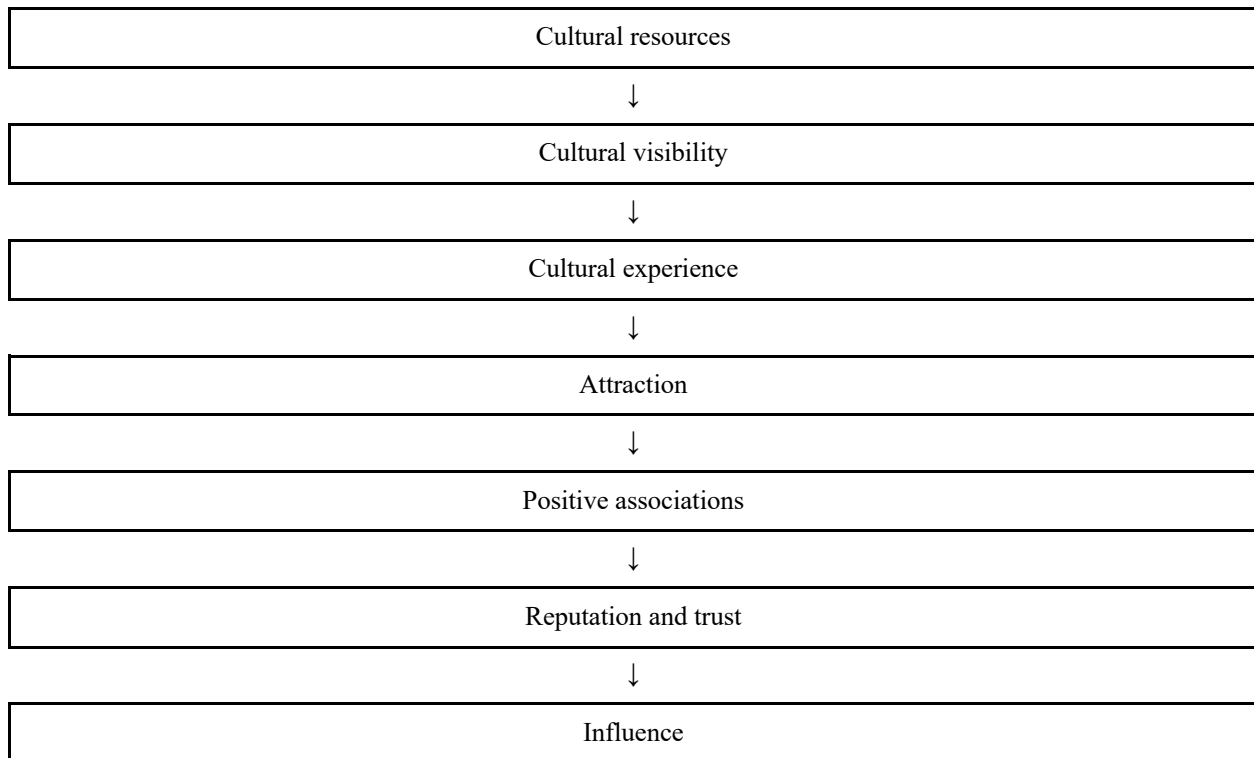


Figure 1. Conversion process from cultural resources to influence

Source: Proposed by the author.

2.2. Nation branding and competitive identity

Nation branding provides a framework for understanding how multiple national attributes become organized into recognizable international associations. Anholt's concept of competitive identity argues that national reputation emerges from the interaction of policies and actual behavior rather than communication campaigns alone. A country gains stronger international positioning when its tourism, exports, governance, culture, people, investment environment, and international engagement communicate compatible associations (Anholt, 2007).

Dinnie (2008) emphasizes that national brands are multi-stakeholder constructs involving governments, businesses, cultural organizations, citizens, diaspora communities, tourism actors, exporters, educational institutions, and international audiences. Unlike corporate brands, a nation brand cannot be centrally controlled in a complete sense. It must instead be coordinated through a common strategic identity that still allows diversity in expression.

Fan (2010) distinguishes national identity, national image, and nation branding. A nation's identity originates primarily from how it understands itself, whereas national image concerns external perceptions. Nation-brand management therefore operates in the space between internal identity and external perception. If the externally communicated image lacks substantive foundations,

communication can become superficial. Conversely, a country may possess significant cultural advantages but fail to achieve international recognition because those assets have not been translated into coherent external meanings.

For this study, national brand positioning is defined as the establishment of a relatively distinctive, credible, and desirable place for a country in the perceptions of international stakeholders compared with competing national images.

2.3. Public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy

Public diplomacy provides the communication and relationship infrastructure through which soft-power resources can reach foreign publics. Cull (2008) identifies five major components of public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. Successful public diplomacy requires not only sending messages but also understanding foreign audiences and developing sustained networks and relationships.

Gilboa (2008) emphasizes the multidisciplinary character of contemporary public diplomacy and its connections with communication, international relations, media framing, national image, and nation branding. From this perspective, cultural diplomacy should not be understood as a sequence of isolated performances or ceremonial events. It can serve as a long-term relationship-building mechanism that connects artists, cultural institutions, universities, communities, media organizations, governments, creative firms, and international audiences.

Recent research in Vietnam also indicates that the effectiveness of heritage communication depends substantially on how information is received and evaluated by local communities. Phuong and Lam (2025), in their study of cultural heritage communication in Hanoi, place community feedback at the center of communication-effectiveness assessment. This supports an interactive approach to cultural diplomacy: cultural value is more likely to become durable attraction when audiences are not merely recipients of messages but participate in interpreting, sharing, and reproducing cultural meaning.

The 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions provides an additional normative basis. The Convention recognizes cultural activities, goods, and services as vehicles of identity, values, and meaning while emphasizing intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, international cooperation, technological development, and the strengthening of cultural industries.

2.4. Cultural industries as soft-power infrastructure

Cultural soft power is increasingly mediated through markets and digital distribution. Films, music, games, fashion, design, cuisine, publishing, performing arts, tourism experiences, crafts, digital content, and other cultural-industry products provide repeated points of contact between a nation and foreign publics.

This differs from one-time cultural promotion. A cultural product distributed repeatedly through international markets can continuously reproduce national associations without requiring direct state communication. Successful cultural industries therefore perform three functions simultaneously: they generate economic value, circulate cultural symbols, and create familiarity with the country of origin.

Consequently, cultural soft power should be analyzed through both heritage capital and creative production capacity. Heritage supplies depth, authenticity, historical distinctiveness, and symbolic legitimacy. Cultural industries transform cultural resources into contemporary forms that can circulate internationally.

Under conditions of digitalization, this conversion increasingly depends on the capacity to preserve, organize, and disseminate cultural resources in digital environments. Phuong (2025) examines the opportunities and limitations of digital preservation for Vietnamese cultural heritage in the age of smart technology, showing that digital preservation is not merely an archival issue but also concerns accessibility, interpretation, and the wider circulation of heritage values. This is particularly relevant to soft power because the international visibility of heritage increasingly depends on digital communication and distribution infrastructure.

2.5. Proposed analytical framework

Based on the above literature, this study develops a four-layer analytical framework. It treats culture not as a final output but as the initial resource in a conversion chain. Strong national positioning requires the four layers to operate coherently and reinforce one another.

Table 1. Analytical framework for cultural soft power and national brand positioning

Analytical layer	Core components	Strategic question	Expected outcome
Cultural resource base	Heritage, history, cuisine, arts, traditions, values, landscapes, creativity	What is distinctive and attractive?	Cultural identity
Conversion mechanisms	Cultural industries, tourism, cultural diplomacy, exchanges, media, digital platforms	How do international audiences encounter the culture?	Visibility and experience
Perception formation	Familiarity, attraction, authenticity, trust, emotional association	How is Vietnam interpreted externally?	Nation-brand image

Strategic outcomes	Reputation, preference, tourism, exports, partnerships, international influence	What value results from perception?	National brand positioning and soft power
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Source: Proposed by the author based on Nye (1990, 2004), Anholt (2007), Dinnie (2008), Fan (2010), and Cull (2008).

2.6. Research design and data sources

The study adopts a qualitative research design based primarily on document analysis and conceptual synthesis. This approach is appropriate because the purpose is not to estimate individual-level causal effects but to identify relationships among cultural resources, external perception, national branding, and policy mechanisms.

The documentary corpus is organized into four groups. The first consists of seminal academic literature on soft power, nation branding, competitive identity, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy, particularly Nye (1990, 2004), Anholt (2007), Dinnie (2008), Cull (2008), Gilboa (2008), and Fan (2010). The second includes international normative and heritage materials, principally UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and updated UNESCO information on Vietnamese tangible and intangible heritage.

The third group consists of Vietnamese policy documents spanning Party-level orientations, Government strategies and action programmes, and sectoral implementation instruments. These include Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW of 2014 on building and developing Vietnamese culture and people; Conclusion No. 76-KL/TW of 2020 on continuing the implementation of Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW; the Strategy for Cultural Development to 2030 under Decision No. 1909/QĐ-TTg of 2021; the Strategy for Cultural Diplomacy to 2030 under Decision No. 2013/QĐ-TTg of 2021; the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism's implementation plan for external cultural relations for 2022-2026 under Decision No. 3586/QĐ-BVHTTDL of 2021; the Strategy for the Development of Vietnam's Cultural Industries to 2030, with a vision to 2045, under Decision No. 2486/QĐ-TTg of 2025; Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW of 2026 on the development of Vietnamese culture; the Government Action Programme under Resolution No. 30/NQ-CP of 2026; and the Strategy for External Cultural Relations to 2030, with a vision to 2045, under Decision No. 1306/QĐ-TTg of 2026. The fourth group contains international perception indicators from Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2026. These indicators are used descriptively rather than as direct causal measures. The 2026 index is based on responses from more than 150,000 respondents across more than 100 countries and evaluates all 193 United Nations member states.

The analytical procedure involves thematic coding according to four categories: (1) cultural assets; (2) conversion mechanisms; (3) external perception; and (4) strategic outcomes. Policy objectives are then compared with international perception indicators and recent Vietnam-focused empirical studies to identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the conversion of cultural resources into national-brand value.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Global geopolitical reconfiguration increases the strategic value of cultural positioning

The contemporary geopolitical environment is characterized not only by competition for economic and military influence but also by competition over narratives, standards, legitimacy, lifestyle, technology, culture, and international public opinion. Digital platforms have significantly expanded the number of actors participating in international image formation. Governments no longer monopolize national representation; films, creators, businesses, tourists, diasporas, universities, sports figures, online communities, and global consumers also shape perceptions.

In this environment, nation brands become strategic because international actors face an abundance of competing information. A distinctive and credible national identity reduces perceptual ambiguity. Countries associated consistently with particular values, cultural experiences, capabilities, and products are easier to recognize and remember.

Recent global soft-power results illustrate the instability of international perception and the multidimensionality of national influence. For emerging powers, the implication is important: cultural positioning can provide strategic differentiation without requiring symmetrical competition with major powers in military resources. A country may instead build international relevance through specialized areas in which it has authentic comparative advantages.

3.2. Vietnam possesses a substantial and diverse cultural resource base

Vietnam's first major advantage is historical and cultural depth. Its national cultural resources incorporate historical continuity, archaeological and architectural heritage, religious and spiritual traditions, ethnic diversity, festivals, traditional arts, craft villages, performance traditions, cuisine, landscapes, historical cities, and regionally differentiated cultural practices.

UNESCO data provide an internationally recognized dimension of this resource base. As of 2026, Vietnam has nine properties inscribed on the World Heritage List, comprising six cultural, two natural, and one mixed property. The list includes the Complex of Hue Monuments, Hoi An Ancient Town, My Son Sanctuary, the Central Sector of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long, the Trang An Landscape Complex, and the Yen Tu-Vinh Nghiem-Con Son, Kiep Bac complex inscribed in 2025.

Vietnam also has 17 elements inscribed under UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention. These encompass court music, gong culture, Quan Ho singing, Ca tru, the Giong Festival, worship of the Hung Kings, Don ca tai tu, Vi and Giam folk songs, Bai Choi, Xoe dance, Cham pottery-making, Dong Ho folk woodblock printing, and other cultural practices.

These recognitions are important not because UNESCO designation automatically creates soft power, but because international recognition provides credibility, discoverability, and institutional legitimacy. It creates a platform from which cultural resources can be interpreted for international audiences.

Vietnam’s second major advantage is cuisine. In the Global Soft Power Index 2026, Vietnam ranks 14th globally for “food the world loves.” This is substantially higher than Vietnam’s overall soft-power rank of 52nd and therefore constitutes one of the country’s strongest internationally perceived cultural attributes.

Vietnam’s third advantage is the combination of heritage with contemporary social experience. International perceptions of friendliness, tourism experiences, urban culture, coffee culture, street food, crafts, traditional festivals, and everyday lifestyle can transform abstract cultural knowledge into direct emotional associations. This type of experience is particularly valuable because experiential contact tends to generate more durable brand meaning than official communication alone.

Recent Vietnam-focused studies reinforce the relationship among cultural resources, local identity, and tourism experience. Vu and Nguyen (2026) examine heritage memory and identity through residents’ topophilia in sustainable cultural-tourism development, highlighting the role of memory, identity, and emotional attachment to place in sustaining living cultural spaces. Similarly, Nguyen (2025) analyzes the impact of sustainable tourism on local communities’ awareness of cultural heritage conservation in Hanoi, indicating that conservation and tourism development are more sustainable when communities become active participants in cultural value creation.

At the level of specific cultural assets, Pham et al. (2025) analyze the use of brocade-weaving values in developing distinctive tourism in Northern Vietnam’s mountainous areas. The case illustrates how a traditional craft can be transformed into an identity-rich tourism experience while linking cultural conservation, local livelihoods, and destination positioning. Although this is a micro-level mechanism, it is relevant to nation branding because distinctive local experiences accumulate into the broader cultural image of Vietnam.

3.3. External perception indicates strong cultural potential but incomplete conversion

Brand Finance’s 2026 results provide a useful snapshot of the relative position of Vietnam’s soft-power attributes. The indicators show that some individual attributes, particularly cuisine and future growth potential, outperform Vietnam’s overall soft-power ranking. This suggests that a future national brand should not position Vietnam exclusively as an “ancient culture” or “heritage destination,” because such positioning would underrepresent the country’s contemporary economic and creative transformation.

Table 2. Selected indicators of Vietnam’s international soft-power position, 2026

Indicator	Global position
Overall Global Soft Power Index	52/193
Position in Asia	9th
Food the world loves	14th
Rich heritage	49th
Products and brands the world loves	38th
Friendly	44th
Easy to do business in and with	45th
Advanced in technology and innovation	50th
Future growth potential	12th

Source: Compiled by the author from Brand Finance, Global Soft Power Index 2026.

The pattern reveals a significant structural feature. Vietnam’s strongest international associations do not lie solely in traditional heritage. Cuisine and future growth potential perform particularly well, while products, friendliness, business accessibility, heritage, and technological perceptions occupy a broad middle range.

This suggests that Vietnam’s cultural soft-power opportunity lies in constructing a bridge between two dimensions: deep cultural continuity and contemporary creative energy. The first differentiates Vietnam historically; the second prevents the national image from becoming static or museum-like.

3.4. Vietnam’s policy architecture is increasingly aligned with cultural soft power

Vietnam has developed a progressively more integrated cultural policy framework. The policy trajectory can be understood as a cumulative sequence: Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW (2014) established a foundational orientation for building and developing Vietnamese culture and people; Conclusion No. 76-KL/TW (2020) reaffirmed and extended its implementation; the 2021 cultural-development and cultural-diplomacy strategies, together with sectoral implementation instruments, translated these orientations into

operational priorities; and the 2025-2026 policy cycle more explicitly connected cultural industries, external cultural relations, international positioning, and national soft power. Recent documents therefore no longer treat culture merely as a domain of preservation or spiritual life but increasingly connect it with competitiveness, international image, cultural industries, and national soft power.

Table 3. Major policy foundations related to cultural soft power and national branding

Policy instrument	Issuing authority	Strategic relevance
Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW (2014)	Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam	Establishes the foundational orientation for building and developing Vietnamese culture and people in support of sustainable national development.
Conclusion No. 76-KL/TW (2020)	Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam	Reaffirms and advances the continued implementation of Resolution No. 33-NQ/TW.
Decision No. 1909/QD-TTg (2021)	Prime Minister of Vietnam	Approves the Strategy for Cultural Development to 2030.
Decision No. 2013/QD-TTg (2021)	Prime Minister of Vietnam	Approves the Strategy for Cultural Diplomacy to 2030, linking cultural diplomacy with national interests, international relations, and the strengthening of national soft power.
Decision No. 3586/QD-BVHTTDL (2021)	Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism	Issues the sectoral implementation plan for 2022-2026 to advance Vietnam's external cultural relations, including cultural industries, digital culture, and international cultural engagement.
Decision No. 2486/QD-TTg (2025)	Prime Minister of Vietnam	Approves the Strategy for the Development of Vietnam's Cultural Industries to 2030, with a vision to 2045.
Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW (2026)	Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam	Defines culture as an endogenous national resource and a foundation of national soft power, while setting targets for cultural industries and Vietnam's international soft-power position.
Resolution No. 30/NQ-CP (2026)	Government of Vietnam	Issues the Government Action Programme for implementing Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW, translating Party-level cultural priorities into coordinated implementation tasks.
Decision No. 1306/QD-TTg (2026)	Prime Minister of Vietnam	Approves the Strategy for External Cultural Relations to 2030, with a vision to 2045, linking international cultural integration, cultural industries, heritage recognition, tourism, and cultural communication with national standing and soft power.

Source: Compiled by the author from official Vietnamese policy documents.

Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW is particularly significant because it links cultural development directly with national positioning and national soft power. By 2030, it targets cultural industries contributing 7% of GDP and the formation of 5-10 national cultural-industry brands. By 2045, cultural and creative industries are expected to contribute approximately 9% of GDP, while Vietnam aims to enter the top three in ASEAN and the top 30 globally in national soft power. Resolution No. 30/NQ-CP of 24 February 2026 operationalizes this orientation through a government action programme, reinforcing the shift from high-level cultural objectives toward coordinated implementation across responsible public institutions.

Decision No. 1306/QD-TTg makes the external dimension more explicit. For 2026–2030, the strategy emphasizes international cultural cooperation, prestigious international awards in cultural and artistic fields, international arts festivals with distinctive brands, additional internationally recognized heritage titles, globally competitive cultural-heritage tourism destinations, and an expanded network of Vietnamese cultural centers abroad. The direction is broadly consistent with the conversion chain identified above: cultural resources are expected to move through cultural industries, tourism, international recognition, cultural diplomacy, and digital platforms toward international influence.

3.5. The main constraint is not cultural scarcity but conversion capacity

The evidence suggests that Vietnam's central challenge is not the absence of cultural resources. Rather, the problem lies in converting cultural abundance into internationally scalable brand value. Five principal conversion gaps can be identified.

First, fragmentation between cultural assets and national positioning. Vietnam has numerous individual cultural assets, but their international presentation often remains organized by sector, locality, event, or institution. Heritage promotion, tourism promotion, cultural diplomacy, trade promotion, national branding, creative-industry development, and external communication may overlap without always communicating through a fully integrated architecture. A nation brand requires diversity without strategic incoherence. The objective is not to homogenize Vietnam's cultural diversity but to provide an overarching proposition that enables different cultural expressions to reinforce one another.

Second, a gap between heritage strength and cultural-industry scalability. Traditional culture and heritage provide authenticity, but contemporary soft power increasingly depends on reproducible and distributable products. Films, music, games, fashion, books, digital content, animation, design, cuisine brands, festivals, and creative tourism allow cultural identity to travel through markets. Vietnam's recent policy framework has increasingly recognized this gap by placing cultural industries at the center of cultural development strategy.

Third, international communication remains vulnerable to episodic promotion. Cultural weeks, diplomatic events, festivals, exhibitions, and official visits remain valuable, but their influence can be temporary if they are not embedded in continuous communication ecosystems. Cultural soft power requires repeated contact. Foreign audiences should be able to encounter Vietnamese culture before, during, and after official events through films, music, books, food, tourism, digital content, educational programs, cultural institutions, and commercial products.

Fourth, insufficient differentiation for different international audiences. A single national narrative cannot be equally effective across all regions and audience segments. Young digital audiences, tourists, investors, scholars, overseas Vietnamese communities, cultural professionals, and foreign policymakers encounter Vietnam through different channels. A coherent national identity should therefore support differentiated audience strategies rather than identical communication.

Fifth, measurement remains more focused on outputs than international perception. Counting cultural events, exhibitions, festivals, visitor numbers, or communication products is necessary but insufficient. Cultural soft power should ultimately be assessed through changes in familiarity, preference, trust, cultural consumption, intention to visit, willingness to recommend, consumption of Vietnamese cultural products, and positive associations with Vietnam. Without these measures, communication activity may be mistaken for communication effectiveness.

The conversion gap is also reflected in recent empirical heritage research in Vietnam. Phuong and Lam (2025) show that heritage communication should be evaluated through community feedback, while Ha, Vu, and Pham (2026) focus on architectural heritage interpretation quality at the Imperial Citadel of Hue and its relationship with responsible tourist behavior. Taken together, these studies indicate that heritage value does not automatically translate into positive perception or behavior; interpretation quality, communication, and experience are important intermediate mechanisms in the conversion process.

3.6. Proposed Cultural Soft Power–National Brand Positioning Framework

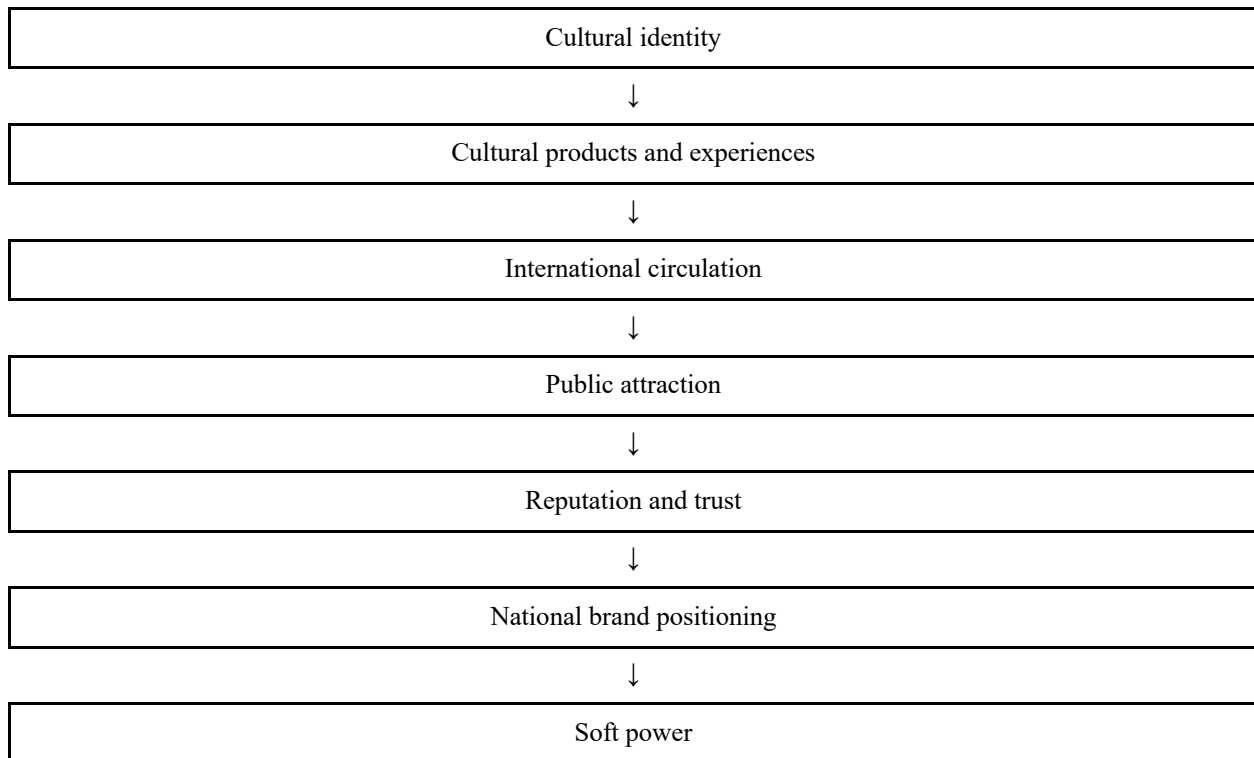
Based on the findings, this study proposes an integrated framework consisting of five strategic pillars. The purpose is to move from the promotion of individual cultural assets toward the management of a value chain capable of generating recognition, experience, attraction, trust, and influence.

Table 4. Proposed Cultural Soft Power–National Brand Positioning Framework for Vietnam

Pillar	Core orientation	Illustrative instruments	Desired outcome
1. Distinctive cultural identity	Define the core national cultural proposition	Heritage narrative, values, people, cuisine, lifestyle, contemporary creativity	Brand clarity
2. Competitive cultural products	Transform culture into scalable experiences and products	Film, music, games, fashion, design, cuisine, crafts, tourism, digital content	International consumption
3. Networked cultural diplomacy	Build long-term international relationships	Cultural centers, festivals, artist exchanges, universities, diaspora networks	Trust and relationships
4. Digital narrative infrastructure	Maintain continuous global visibility	Multilingual content, digital heritage, streaming, social media, immersive technologies	Familiarity and engagement
5. International perception measurement	Measure outcomes rather than activities alone	Soft-power indicators, audience surveys, cultural exports, sentiment analysis	Strategic learning

Source: Proposed by the author based on the research findings.

The strategic conversion pathway from cultural identity to soft power is shown in Figure 2.

STRATEGIC CONVERSION PATHWAY FROM CULTURAL IDENTITY TO SOFT POWER**Figure 2. Strategic conversion pathway from cultural identity to soft power****Source: Proposed by the author.**

A feedback mechanism should connect international perception back to cultural-policy design so that strategy can be adjusted according to changing foreign audiences rather than operating entirely through a domestic supply logic.

Within this framework, digital narrative infrastructure serves not only a communication function but also enables the preservation and reuse of cultural resources in new contexts of reception. Phuong (2025) shows that digital preservation of Vietnamese cultural heritage can broaden access while also creating implementation constraints. The effectiveness of the digital pillar should therefore be evaluated by its capacity to create meaningful experiences and expand international reach, rather than simply by the quantity of digitized resources.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings support Nye's theoretical distinction between resources and power outcomes. Possessing cultural resources does not automatically generate influence. Resources become power only when they affect the preferences or behavior of others. Vietnam's large cultural resource base should therefore be understood as soft-power potential, whereas international attraction and national positioning represent soft-power outcomes.

This distinction is particularly important for heritage-rich states. A country may accumulate UNESCO designations while remaining comparatively weak in global cultural markets. Conversely, a contemporary cultural product may generate substantial international awareness even when foreign audiences have limited knowledge of the country's deeper history. Effective national positioning therefore requires interaction between heritage and cultural industries rather than choosing between them.

Recent Vietnam-focused studies add empirical support at the community and destination levels. Vu and Nguyen (2026) place heritage memory, identity, and place attachment in relation to sustainable cultural-tourism development; Nguyen (2025) emphasizes local community awareness of cultural heritage conservation; and Ha, Vu, and Pham (2026) focus on heritage interpretation quality and tourist behavior. Considered together, these studies suggest that the conversion of cultural soft power passes through at least three layers: identity and memory, interpretation quality and experience, and only then perception and behavior.

Vietnam's 2026 international perception profile supports this conclusion. The country performs substantially better in cuisine than in its overall soft-power ranking. Heritage perception is improving but remains lower than the depth of Vietnam's actual heritage portfolio might suggest. This difference indicates that objective cultural possession and international perception are not equivalent. A strategic implication is that "Vietnamese culture" should be treated as a portfolio of mutually reinforcing national-brand assets. Heritage provides authenticity; cuisine provides accessibility; tourism provides direct experience; creative industries provide scalability; diplomacy provides institutional legitimacy; people-to-people exchange creates relationships; and digital platforms provide continuous global distribution.

The second major issue concerns positioning. Vietnam's national cultural identity should not be reduced to a single historical symbol or slogan. Its contemporary international image is increasingly shaped by a combination of tradition, economic dynamism, innovation, social interaction, food, tourism, and cultural diversity. The most productive positioning is therefore likely to connect tradition with modernity.

Vietnam: deep heritage – living culture – creative future

This phrase is not proposed as a finished advertising slogan but as a positioning logic. "Deep heritage" represents historical continuity and internationally recognized heritage. "Living culture" emphasizes that culture remains present in food, communities, rituals, crafts, cities, festivals, and everyday practices. "Creative future" connects culture with design, digital content, cultural industries, young creators, technology, and Vietnam's strong international perception for future growth potential.

The third issue is geopolitical. In a period of intensified international competition, cultural branding should not be treated as propaganda. Attraction depends on authenticity and voluntary reception. Public-diplomacy scholarship emphasizes that credibility deteriorates when communication diverges sharply from reality (Cull, 2008). Cultural soft power therefore works most effectively when foreign audiences encounter cultural quality directly and develop their own positive associations.

This requirement supports an ecosystem approach. The state can establish strategic direction, infrastructure, funding mechanisms, legal frameworks, cultural centers, diplomatic platforms, and international partnerships, but cultural attraction must also be generated by artists, businesses, communities, restaurants, designers, filmmakers, game developers, tourism enterprises, universities, students, athletes, diaspora communities, and citizens.

The fourth issue concerns digital transformation. Digital platforms fundamentally change cultural diplomacy because content can circulate globally without the geographic constraints of traditional cultural centers. Yet digital visibility creates stronger international competition. The strategic problem is no longer simply providing information about Vietnam; it is ensuring that Vietnamese cultural content is discoverable, engaging, multilingual, credible, reusable, and competitive within global attention markets.

Finally, cultural soft power should be connected with economic strategy. Cultural industries transform symbolic value into economic value, while economic circulation can reinforce symbolic influence. Vietnamese restaurants abroad, internationally distributed films, games inspired by Vietnamese history, fashion incorporating Vietnamese design elements, creative tourism, music, publishing, architecture, and craft products can simultaneously generate revenue and familiarity. The 2005 UNESCO Convention supports this dual perspective by recognizing that cultural goods and services carry both economic and cultural dimensions.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

This study examines national brand positioning through cultural soft power in the context of global geopolitical reconfiguration, with Vietnam as the principal analytical case. The findings demonstrate that cultural soft power increasingly occupies the intersection of international relations, public diplomacy, nation branding, cultural policy, and cultural industries.

The first conclusion is that national influence in the contemporary international system cannot be understood exclusively through material capabilities. Attraction, credibility, cultural familiarity, reputation, and the capacity to generate desirable associations have become significant components of international influence.

The second conclusion is that Vietnam possesses a strong cultural resource base. UNESCO-recognized tangible and intangible heritage, cuisine, regional cultural diversity, traditional arts, landscapes, living cultural practices, cultural tourism, traditional crafts, and contemporary creativity provide substantial foundations for cultural soft power. Vietnam's 14th-place global position for "food the world loves" in the 2026 Global Soft Power Index demonstrates that particular Vietnamese cultural attributes already possess strong international appeal.

The third conclusion is that the principal strategic problem lies in conversion rather than resource scarcity. Vietnam's overall soft-power ranking of 52nd remains substantially below its strongest cultural attributes. Cultural resources need to be transformed through competitive cultural products, sustained international distribution, experiential tourism, cultural diplomacy, digital communication, and international networks before they can generate stronger national-brand outcomes.

The fourth conclusion is that Vietnam's policy framework has moved rapidly toward recognizing this relationship. Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW and Decision No. 1306/QĐ-TTg explicitly connect culture, cultural industries, international integration, national branding, and soft power, including the strategic target of reaching the top three in ASEAN and the top 30 globally in national soft power by 2045.

The study therefore proposes that Vietnam move from a promotion-oriented model, centered mainly on presenting cultural assets, toward a positioning-oriented model in which cultural resources are systematically selected, developed, circulated, experienced, measured, and connected with a coherent national identity.

5.2. Policy and practical recommendations

First, Vietnam should develop a unified national cultural positioning architecture. This architecture should not replace existing tourism, investment, export, or diplomatic brands but should provide an overarching cultural proposition connecting them. A

common strategic narrative, visual principles, key national associations, multilingual terminology, and shared communication resources should be available for ministries, local governments, diplomatic missions, cultural institutions, businesses, and major international events.

Second, priority should be given to cultural sectors with high international scalability. Heritage remains foundational, but stronger international influence requires products capable of recurring distribution. Film, music, games, animation, cuisine, fashion, design, performing arts, digital content, traditional crafts, publishing, and cultural tourism should therefore become priority interfaces between cultural identity and foreign audiences. This direction is consistent with Vietnam's current policy emphasis on developing 5–10 national cultural-industry brands.

Third, Vietnamese cuisine should be developed as a major gateway to the national brand. Its 14th-place global perception ranking makes cuisine one of the most immediately scalable cultural assets available to Vietnam. Rather than promoting individual dishes alone, a national cuisine strategy should connect food with agricultural products, regional identities, culinary tourism, restaurants abroad, chefs, geographical indications, design, hospitality, and cultural storytelling.

Fourth, cultural diplomacy should evolve from event diplomacy toward network diplomacy. Vietnamese cultural centers abroad, diplomatic missions, universities, artist networks, overseas Vietnamese communities, cultural institutions, international festivals, and creative enterprises should operate as interconnected nodes. The priority should be long-term relationships and repeated engagement rather than the number of isolated cultural events.

Fifth, cultural-diplomacy activities should become more audience-specific. Strategies for Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, and other regions should be informed by audience research. Young audiences may be reached through digital content, games, music, fashion, cuisine, and creators; academic audiences through research and educational exchange; tourism audiences through cultural experiences; and professional creative communities through co-production and residency programs.

Sixth, Vietnam should strengthen international cultural co-production. Joint films, exhibitions, festivals, music projects, publishing projects, games, design projects, heritage research, and artistic residencies can provide access to distribution channels and audiences that national promotion alone cannot easily reach. Co-production also reduces the risk of one-directional communication.

Seventh, digital cultural infrastructure should be treated as strategic soft-power infrastructure. High-quality multilingual heritage databases, digital exhibitions, maps, audiovisual archives, virtual experiences, short-form cultural content, searchable media assets, licensing systems, and international digital-distribution partnerships should be integrated. Digitalization should not merely reproduce physical archives; it should increase international discovery, interpretation, participation, and reuse.

Eighth, cultural soft-power measurement should be institutionalized. A national dashboard could combine external soft-power rankings, country-image surveys, international media visibility, cultural exports, digital engagement, international audiences for Vietnamese content, tourist cultural experiences, international awards, foreign-language searches, cultural-product consumption, and perceptions of selected national attributes.

Ninth, policy coordination should move toward a permanent cross-sector mechanism involving culture, foreign affairs, tourism, trade, education, science and technology, media, local governments, private cultural enterprises, researchers, and diaspora organizations. Cultural soft power crosses administrative boundaries and cannot be optimized within a single sector.

Tenth, the development of soft power must remain grounded in cultural authenticity and community participation. Heritage should not be reduced to commercial symbols detached from its social meaning. Commercial development and international promotion should therefore be accompanied by safeguards for cultural diversity, intellectual property, community interests, and the sustainability of cultural practices.

5.3. Research limitations and future research

This study is primarily qualitative and document-based. It does not directly survey international audiences and therefore cannot determine causal relationships between individual cultural products and changes in attitudes toward Vietnam. The Global Soft Power Index is useful as an external perception benchmark but represents one measurement system and should not be treated as a complete measure of national influence.

Future research should conduct comparative surveys among target international audiences in selected foreign markets to identify which Vietnamese cultural associations are most recognizable, attractive, credible, and distinctive. A complementary sample of foreign residents or visitors in Vietnam could be used to compare perceptions formed primarily through mediated exposure abroad with perceptions shaped by direct in-country experience. Experimental studies could further examine how exposure to Vietnamese films, cuisine, music, heritage, tourism content, or digital storytelling affects perceptions of the country.

Further studies should also compare Vietnam with selected Asian countries that have developed strong cultural-industry and soft-power strategies. Such comparative evidence would help identify institutional arrangements, financing mechanisms, public-private partnerships, international distribution models, and measurement systems suitable for adaptation to Vietnam.

Longitudinal studies should track changes in Vietnam's international cultural image through 2030 and 2045 in relation to the strategic objectives established under Resolution No. 80-NQ/TW and Decision No. 1306/QĐ-TTg.

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