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Preserving Cultural Identity – A Form of “Soft Power” Contributing to the Development Process in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Do Van Hoc¹, Dang Thi Hoai², Nguyen Duc Quyen³

Abstract

For a society to achieve sustainable development, it must harmoniously and equitably advance across multiple sectors, including politics, economy, and culture. Social development should not be measured solely by economic indicators; rather, culture especially the traditional values of the nation plays a crucial role in guiding society toward sustainable progress. Many countries have increasingly recognized cultural “soft power” as a key resource in leveraging their comprehensive national strength (encompassing politics, economy, natural resources, human capital, science and technology, security, defense, and foreign affairs) to enhance national competitiveness and international standing. Based on clarifying the role of cultural identity in national development, this article identifies specific expressions of Vietnamese cultural identity as manifested in Ho Chi Minh City. It further emphasizes the importance of preserving this identity in relation to the city’s socio-economic development. Finally, the paper assesses the current state of cultural preservation and proposes essential solutions to safeguard and promote national cultural identity in Ho Chi Minh City in the coming years.

Keywords: Preservation, Cultural Identity, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Introduction

In Vietnam’s current development context, culture and national cultural identity have increasingly become vital resources. The power and potential of culture are being harnessed and transformed into a form of “*soft power*” to strengthen national capacity and elevate the country’s international standing. Vietnam is a nation with a long-standing cultural and civilizational history, characterized by thousands of years of tradition. This cultural heritage possesses its own system of values and unique identity, which has never been assimilated by any foreign invader. These values and that identity form the essence of Vietnam’s cultural soft power.

In the context of globalization and deep international integration, alongside efforts to promote comprehensive national strength, many countries have come to regard cultural resources as an important form of *soft power* that can support rapid and sustainable development, while also enhancing their global position and influence.

Therefore, throughout the integration process, while Vietnam prioritizes economic development, there is growing awareness of the vital role and mission of culture. Culture serves as the essential foundation of society and a driving force for the country’s sustainable development.

¹ University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Email: hocdovan@hcmussh.edu.vn

² Thuongmai University, Vietnam, Email: danghoai@tmu.edu.vn, (Corresponding author).

³ Ho Chi Minh City Cadre Academy, Vietnam. Email: n.dquyen@hcmca.edu.vn



Aligned with the national development strategy, Ho Chi Minh City one of the country's major urban centers and a political, economic, and cultural hub faces the pressing task of becoming a "civilized, modern socialist city" and leading the Southern Key Economic Region. With a history of over 300 years, Saigon – Ho Chi Minh City is a place where cultural and historical values from millennia of national construction and defense have converged. Throughout previous centuries, the people of Saigon equipped themselves with spiritual weapons and national cultural traditions, persistently rising up in the struggle to protect their homeland.

Today, in the era of renovation and development, despite facing various challenges, the city's Party Committee and people have, through solidarity and effort, continued to promote national cultural values and uphold the "revolutionary tradition of resilience, perseverance, unity, dynamism, and creativity" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2013). As a result, they have achieved comprehensive and significant accomplishments across various sectors.

Studying the cultural identity of the Vietnamese nation in Ho Chi Minh City, identifying the importance of preserving this identity in the city's socio-economic development, clarifying its current status, and proposing solutions for its preservation and promotion in the coming period is a matter of great significance.

Literature Review

Due to the diverse and distinctive nature of culture and national cultural identity in general, along with the significant roles that Vietnamese cultural identity plays in the country's development particularly in Ho Chi Minh City related research in this field is extensive and multifaceted. The following is a summary of some key representative works:

The compilation *"Concepts and Perceptions of Culture"* (Institute of Culture, 1986) affirms that culture is a highly fluid and multidimensional concept. Each contributor, from their own perspective, offers distinct interpretations and conceptualizations of culture.

Other notable works include: *"Socialist Culture"* (compiled by a group of scholars from the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 1997); Trinh's *"Issues of Culture and Development"* (2000); Vuong's edited volume *"Foundations of Vietnamese Culture"* (1998); and Hoang's *"Culture in the Historical Materialist Perspective of Karl Marx"* (2000). These studies provide insightful examinations of Vietnamese cultural identity and its role in national development.

A considerable number of scientific conferences, research projects, and publications have addressed the topic of Vietnamese cultural identity and its impact on the country's progress. Among these, several works stand out:

Ha's *"Preserving Vietnamese National Identity in the Current Context of Globalization"* (2011) analyzes the foundations and characteristics of national identity, emphasizing its importance. Positioned within the broader context of globalization and its dual impacts, the author proposes key orientations and strategies for preserving and promoting Vietnamese national identity as a foundation for human development, social progress, and sustainable national growth.

The book *"Traditional Cultural Values of Vietnam"* (2010), edited by Thinh, systematically presents a general framework of traditional Vietnamese values while delving into their manifestations across various domains of national life.

Other important contributions include: Huy's *"National Identity in Culture"* (1990); Tran Ngoc Them's *"In Search of National Cultural Identity"*; Ngoc's *"Vietnamese Cultural Identity"*

(2002); and Duy’s edited volume *“National Identity and the Modernization of Vietnamese Culture – Some Theoretical and Practical Issues”* (2006). These authors explore in depth the concept, essence, characteristics, and formation conditions of Vietnamese cultural identity, as well as its critical role in contemporary national development.

In summary, these studies have provided a clear, comprehensive, and diverse foundation for understanding culture and cultural identity. They serve as valuable references that inform and enrich the present research.

Results and Discussion

Cultural Identity and the Need to Preserve It in the Development Process

Culture is inherently linked to human creativity. Researchers studying the history of human civilization particularly Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who regarded culture as part of the superstructure have demonstrated that the origin of culture lies in labor that has been socialized. Human history is a continuous process of exploration and innovation to meet the demands of life. It is through labor that the transformation from higher primates into modern humans was made possible. As Karl Marx wrote: “Labor is the basic and prime condition for all human life... it is labor that has created man himself” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 641). According to Engels, “The hand is not only the organ of labor, it is also the product of labor. Only through labor, through adaptation to ever new operations, through the transmission of this development by heredity... and ultimately through the constant repetition of such inherited refinement in increasingly complex actions, has the human hand reached the high degree of perfection that enabled it to produce the paintings of Raphael, the statues of Thorvaldsen, and the music of Paganini” (Marx & Engels, 1994, p. 643).

Thus, culture reflects human development through labor and creativity. All values generated through practical human activity are cultural; to speak of culture is to speak of humanity. Professor Tan once noted: “If humans are nature’s most unique and advanced product, then culture is likewise a unique natural product shaped and transformed by human beings to create tools and means that serve and fulfill human life and development” (Tan, 2005, p. 40). From this perspective, culture is a multi-layered, multi-dimensional concept with vast scope and profound content. It is the result of human creativity in the course of practical activity, both in the past and present.

In Vietnam, many interpretations and conceptualizations of culture have been proposed. In the course of extensive discussions on the concept of socialist culture and on building a modern Vietnamese culture rich in national identity, scholars have introduced various definitions and perspectives. According to the *Vietnamese Dictionary*, “identity” refers to the unique qualities or characteristics that form a distinctive feature. In current academic and intellectual discourse in Vietnam, the terms “*national identity of culture*” and “*cultural identity of the nation*” have not been used consistently. In his article “*Major Issues in the Fifth Party Central Committee Resolution on Culture*” (Communist Review, No. 16, 1998), Professor Nguyễn Đức Bình used the two terms interchangeably (Bình, 1998). Similarly, the Politburo’s Resolution No. 09 (1995) on major orientations for ideological work uses the phrase “preserving and promoting the national cultural identity.” The documents of the Fifth Plenum of the 8th Central Committee (1998) also employ both terms interchangeably. Accordingly, *cultural identity* refers to the distinctive, core value system of a nation, created, nurtured, and passed down from generation to generation.

In his monograph *“National Identity of Culture,”* Huy explained: “To speak of the national identity of culture is to refer to the soulful essence of a people’s culture. It manifests everywhere and in every aspect, following the unique style of the nation. It evolves through the labor and struggles of generations throughout history. This identity influences regional customs, traditions, and subcultural zones” (Huy, 1990, p. 27). Looking back at Vietnamese history, one can see that since ancient times, the Vietnamese people had already formed a nation with its own language, customs, lifestyle, economic practices, and cultural heritage distinguished by deeply rooted national characteristics.

Promoting the strength of cultural identity is essentially the promotion of Vietnam’s cultural soft power in the development process. This is both a requirement and a solution to realize the nation’s aspirations for growth. In the context of current global trends, soft power is increasingly becoming a crucial strategy for nations to enhance their overall national power.

The Current State of Preserving the Cultural Identity of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in the Process of Development

Based on the dating of prehistoric artifacts, archaeologists and historians have determined that Saigon – now Ho Chi Minh City – has been inhabited by humans since thousands of years ago. Compared to the millennia-long history of the Vietnamese nation, Ho Chi Minh City is a relatively young urban center. However, “young” in this context carries a distinctive meaning: it emerged and developed during the last three centuries of the second millennium, a period when Western capitalism was entering the stage of industrialization and expanding vigorously into Asia and Africa. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and into the early 20th century, Vietnam experienced a period of tremendous social upheaval and turbulence: “numerous peasant uprisings broke out, wars of aggression and resistance followed one after another, dynasties collapsed, millions of people were displaced, the country was lost and families scattered, tradition clashed with modernity, and the path to national advancement was obscure...” (Giau, 1980, p. 108–109).

Saigon – Ho Chi Minh City, though naturally endowed with favorable conditions and abundant resources, has also faced many upheavals and challenges through the country’s long history of continuous and intense struggles. From 1790 to 1801, Saigon held the status of the capital of Gia Dinh. After reclaiming Phu Xuan and then Thang Long, Nguyen Anh renounced the title of Lord and proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long, establishing the imperial capital in Hue (1802), and Saigon became Gia Dinh Citadel. This historical reality significantly influenced the region’s socio-cultural life. Nevertheless, thanks to its geographical location, natural conditions, and socio-economic characteristics, Saigon continued to grow in many aspects.

Ho Chi Minh City is now a vibrant, youthful urban center with the most dynamic socio-economic activities in the country. It is projected to become an industrial city by the end of the second decade of the 21st century, playing the leading role in the economic and social development strategy of the Southern Key Economic Region. The city is expected to “lead and reach the finish line first” in the mission of building Ho Chi Minh City into “a civilized, modern socialist city”. This means that Ho Chi Minh City, as one of the 63 provinces and municipalities of Vietnam, shares in the nation’s overall development and bears the general features of the industrialization and modernization process. However, tied to its specific spatial context geographically, economically, socially and its people, the city also possesses distinct characteristics in carrying out industrialization and modernization.

Generally speaking, Ho Chi Minh City is strategically situated between the Southeast and the Mekong Delta regions, with continuously expanding waterway, road, and air transportation networks that facilitate trade both domestically and internationally. The city quickly became the economic locomotive of the Southern Key Economic Region, a favorable condition for promoting industrialization and modernization. In terms of population, the city's multiethnic, multicultural makeup fosters diversity, openness, and dynamism crucial traits in advancing modernization and industrialization. Moreover, it meets the demand for a highly qualified workforce required for economic development. Economically, Ho Chi Minh City was among the earliest in Vietnam to develop a commodity-based economy. Scientific and technological achievements have significantly contributed to the city's economic growth.

The achievements attained thus far are a crystallization of the national cultural identity, intertwined with the intellect, willpower, and capabilities of the people of Ho Chi Minh City in the development of science and technology one of the core components of the city's industrialization and modernization process, steering the economic restructuring in the right direction. The values of Vietnam's national cultural identity are not only aimed at nurturing individuals with high moral standards and a strong national spirit, but also pose concrete demands tailored to each historical period. The vitality of cultural identity and the promotion of Vietnam's national character constitute a significant driving force for the cause of industrialization and modernization.

Therefore, the human resources of the city must embody qualities such as “ardent patriotism, a strong sense of national pride and self-reliance, a spirit of solidarity, a sense of community connecting individuals–families–villages–nation; compassion and tolerance, a deep appreciation for righteousness and morality; diligence and creativity in labor; refinement in conduct; and simplicity in lifestyle...” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998). These cultural values must be absorbed, internalized, and transformed into the strength that propels each individual forward, forming a firm determination to contribute to the city's development.

In light of the demands of socio-economic development, the people of the city must increasingly recognize the importance of preserving and promoting national cultural identity. In Ho Chi Minh City, this identity serves as a latent vitality ordinarily subtle like a flicker of light, but in moments of need, it blazes forth with brilliance, destroying tyranny and magnifying national spirit. Thus, in parallel with economic growth and the advancement of industrialization and modernization, it is crucial to safeguard and promote national cultural identity and the distinctive spiritual values of the city's people, turning them into key internal resources in the development process.

With the goal of becoming “a civilized, modern socialist city that contributes significantly to the Southern region and the whole country, and gradually becomes an industrial, service, and scientific-technological hub of Southeast Asia, worthy of bearing the name of President Ho Chi Minh” (Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee, 2005, p.25), the city's development must be understood as a comprehensive societal progress centered on and for human beings, powered by the strength of national cultural identity. Preserving and enhancing cultural identity means continuing to foster the spiritual values characteristic of Ho Chi Minh City's culture throughout the process of industrialization and modernization.

From the lessons learned in recent years, the 11th Congress of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee affirmed: “Promoting the dynamism and creativity of the city's people has always been a valuable lesson throughout the journey of overcoming challenges and maturing it has become a tradition and a key strength of the city” (Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee, 2020, p.

25). On the basis of geographical, natural, historical, and economic conditions, a diverse, converging, and radiating cultural region has taken shape, allowing the values of national identity to give rise to “spiritual values bearing the unique characteristics of the city’s people.” These values vividly express, extend, and develop the national cultural heritage into distinctive features of the culture of Saigon – Ho Chi Minh City, reflecting the temperament and characteristics of its people. From a spirit of sharp-mindedness, creativity, and bold initiative to generosity, tolerance, chivalry, pragmatism, disdain for vanity, and a focus on substance over form these qualities not only define a unique regional culture but also serve as an endogenous force that empowers the city to steadily advance in the task of protecting and building the homeland. These spiritual values, marked by the distinctive character of the city’s people, form a cultural foundation and a driving force enabling the city to overcome challenges and sustain continuous development.

It is precisely the spirit of creativity, sensitivity, and problem-solving in the face of socio-economic challenges that has enabled Ho Chi Minh City to consistently lead the way in the national process of renovation. Now, as the city accelerates industrialization and modernization with the goal of “taking the lead and reaching the finish line first,” it becomes increasingly essential to fully awaken and effectively harness the city’s core qualities “resilient willpower, upright spirit; intelligence, eagerness to learn, dynamism, creativity, high capacity for cooperation and remarkable adaptability to circumstances; a liberal demeanor, a chivalrous spirit and openness to external engagement; a practical mindset coupled with a productivity quality efficiency orientation; and a deep respect for the law, a sense of democracy, and transparency...” (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City – Ho Chi Minh City Department of Culture and Information, 2000, p.20). These characteristics must be instilled in the development of a new model citizen shaped with the qualities, competencies, skills, and behaviors needed to meet and serve the demands of the city’s development process.

In the current context where the goals of industrialization and modernization are increasingly intertwined with the knowledge-based economy and the rapid advancement of science and technology the preservation and promotion of Vietnam’s national cultural identity has become a crucial internal resource. It plays a key role in the broader task of nation-building and, more specifically, in the process of industrialization and modernization in Ho Chi Minh City. This situation poses a new requirement for the city: to make breakthroughs that serve as a foundation for absorbing combined forces external and internal alike toward becoming “a civilized, modern socialist city” capable of sustainable development. The cultural identity of the Vietnamese nation, grounded in its fundamental values “ardent patriotism, national pride and self-reliance; solidarity and community cohesion across individuals, families, villages, and the nation; compassion and tolerance, reverence for morality and virtue; diligence and creativity in labor; refinement in social conduct and simplicity in lifestyle...” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998) must be preserved and promoted as a source of strength.

Researcher Dang once observed: “The city’s development history proves that its people have maintained and enhanced the noble cultural values of the nation such as patriotism, compassion, unity, resilience in nation-building and defense, the respect for humanity and justice, and the ability to integrate cultures for development. The national cultural identity in Ho Chi Minh City is a latent life force like a small spark under ordinary conditions, but when the opportunity arises, it bursts into brilliant flame, defeating tyranny and heightening national spirit” (Dang, 1998, p.18).

Since the 8th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1996 which marked a pivotal transition into a new era of promoting industrialization and modernization Ho Chi Minh City, along with the entire nation, has made concerted efforts to achieve development goals that combine economic growth with social equity, while also preserving and promoting national cultural identity. After more than 30 years of implementation, the city's role and status have significantly increased, and its urban landscape increasingly reflects the appearance of a modern metropolis.

Adhering to the perspective that traditional cultural values are a spiritual strength of society, both a goal and a driving force for socio-economic development, the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee has seriously implemented the Party's resolutions and directives on culture. Consequently, awareness of the role of national cultural identity among city-level authorities, sectors, and the general population has been increasingly enhanced. With appropriate policies, initiatives, and resources, the preservation and promotion of national cultural identity have been closely aligned with the city's socio-economic development tasks and are vividly reflected in everyday social life.

Recognizing that fostering ideology, ethics, lifestyles, and a healthy cultural environment is a fundamental, long-term, and regular task, the municipal Party organization, authorities, and political-social organizations have always paid attention to nurturing patriotism and national pride among cadres, Party members, youth union members, and all social classes. A key priority is the construction of a team of truly exemplary cadres and Party members in terms of political ideology, ethics, and lifestyle those who embody Party culture and revolutionary ethics, practice thrift, and resolutely fight against bureaucracy, corruption, and wastefulness.

The Standing Committee of the City Party Committee has actively directed the implementation of Directive No. 15-CT/TU dated October 20, 2003, on the campaign to cultivate moral character and build a healthy lifestyle among cadres and Party members; Directive No. 06-CT/TW dated November 7, 2006, by the Politburo on the campaign “Study and follow the moral example of Ho Chi Minh”; the 11th Central Party Resolution on Party building; and objectives set at the 10th Party Congress of Ho Chi Minh City (2015–2020) to build a city that is “civilized, modern, with a high quality of life and imbued with affection.” The 11th Party Congress of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee (2020–2025) further established the goal of “promoting cultural development, social progress and equity, enhancing social welfare, and building happy families for the nation, with the nation, for the happiness of the people.” In addition, National Assembly Resolution No. 98/2023/QH15 on piloting specific mechanisms and policies for Ho Chi Minh City's development has been welcomed by the Party, authorities, and citizens with strong determination to implement the delegated powers effectively thereby contributing to comprehensive economic and social development, as well as cultural and human development in the new era.

Documents from the Party Congresses of Ho Chi Minh City since 1986 have consistently emphasized the Party Committee's leadership role in promoting cultural development and building citizens of the city. This includes preserving traditional values while selectively integrating suitable aspects of global culture. Party organizations, departments, and mass organizations have concretized this into sets of criteria and ethical standards, guiding cadres and citizens to emulate Ho Chi Minh's moral example in accordance with specific professional and social contexts. From there, the responsibility of each citizen has become a powerful driving

force forming a foundation for law-abiding behavior, the fulfillment of civic duties and rights, and trust in the Party and State's leadership in national development and defense.

The preservation and promotion of the national cultural identity of the people of Ho Chi Minh City are clearly expressed in their mindset, ideals, and lifestyle. When aligned with the people's will, the saying "The State and the people act together" becomes a practical reality. Traditional cultural values must be elevated into a conscious spirit of protecting the hard-earned independence and achievements that earlier generations sacrificed so much to attain. In all aspects of social life, many shining examples of perseverance in study, labor, and innovation have emerged particularly among youth and union members. Each year, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union launches initiatives to identify, honor, and celebrate outstanding young people who excel in academics, work, and societal contributions. Numerous exemplary individuals living noble and meaningful lives quietly contribute in neighborhoods and alleys across the city. Many of these exemplary citizens are ordinary people or the working poor, yet they demonstrate remarkable kindness and solidarity, enriching the social fabric. These individuals live with ideals, and their actions serve as role models to educate and guide the youth and the broader community toward a virtuous lifestyle.

Through developing and institutionalizing mass movements connected to the preservation and promotion of national cultural identity, the city has gradually cultivated and enhanced new ethical and cultural values among its residents. These values patriotism, solidarity, creativity, compassion, and determination to overcome poverty and backwardness are steadily guiding the city toward a civilized, modern society with industrial discipline and urban living standards. Amid rapid industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, Ho Chi Minh City is evolving into a modern metropolis. While there are concerns that the forces of a market economy might erode traditional cultural values, the city's residents continue to uphold and embody national identity.

Despite the high tempo of daily life, work, and social routines in a bustling urban environment, the deep-rooted values of community consciousness, compassion, tolerance, and reverence for moral principles are being maintained and passed on in the evolving urban lifestyle. The cultural traits and distinctive character of the city marked by generosity, openness, tolerance, and harmonious relationships remain vibrant in everyday life. "In particular, the kindness and compassion of the city's people have become increasingly evident in times of economic hardship, especially for policy beneficiary families, the poor, workers, and students. Social welfare campaigns and initiatives have effectively mobilized public strength relying on the people to care for the people. The more difficult the situation, the more strongly this spirit of caring for one another has emerged, achieving practical social outcomes.

Solutions for Preserving and Promoting Cultural Identity – Cultural Soft Power in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

In recent years, the preservation and promotion of Vietnam's national cultural identity have achieved certain accomplishments, making significant contributions to the development of the city. These achievements affirm the role of cultural identity as a spiritual foundation, a driving force, and an objective of development in the process of accelerating industrialization and modernization. However, these accomplishments have yet to fully match the position, role, and developmental needs of the city. Therefore, the preservation and promotion of national cultural identity in Ho Chi Minh City today require a comprehensive and synchronized implementation of solutions. From this study, we propose the following orientation-based solutions:

First, the preservation and promotion of cultural identity must be based on political tasks and tailored to the city's specific characteristics and conditions. It can be affirmed that national cultural identity has played an important role throughout the city's history of formation and development. From the will and determination of the pioneers who reclaimed and settled the land, to the spirit of solidarity and resilience during historical upheavals, and the boldness and adaptability during the era of reconstruction and development, the city with its unique economic, historical, and socio-political conditions has emerged as one of the leading economic, political, and cultural centers of the country, with the mission to “lead and reach the finish line first” in the national development goals.

Second, the preservation of cultural identity must stem from and meet the socio-economic development requirements of the city. Cultural identity must contribute to unlocking and effectively utilizing human resources to meet the demands of industrialization, modernization, and international integration. This includes not only a highly skilled and professional workforce, but also one that embodies creativity, discipline, and an industrial working style all of which are vital to the city's development. Alongside the goal of building a "civilized and sentimental" city, preserving and promoting national cultural identity must embody deeply rooted values of compassion, kindness, openness, and harmony among its citizens. A distinctive feature of a modern urban area is a strong sense of community, in which citizens benefit from public services and maintain a consciousness of civic life. Therefore, national cultural identity must be vividly expressed through daily activities, interpersonal relationships, and lifestyles of city dwellers, with the potential to spread and influence other regions across the country.

Third, the preservation of national cultural identity in Ho Chi Minh City must harmonize tradition with modernity, and be associated with building a progressive Vietnamese culture deeply imbued with national identity. Discussing tradition and modernity involves addressing the old and the new in development. However, not everything old qualifies as tradition some outdated elements may contradict contemporary values or development conditions. Meanwhile, the new and modern reflect a certain level of development appropriate to a historical context. Newly emerged values, once validated over time, may themselves become part of tradition. Nonetheless, some modern elements may conflict with tradition, leading to tensions between the two. Therefore, the balance between tradition and modernity in cultural preservation and promotion is a critical issue that must be addressed.

Conclusion

The preservation and promotion of Vietnam's cultural identity is a responsibility of the entire population, led by the city's Party Committee. It must be carried out persistently, continuously, and effectively, through a systematic implementation of fundamental solutions aimed at enhancing the preservation and promotion of national cultural identity in the city today. Alongside economic and social development, the preservation and promotion of national cultural identity in Ho Chi Minh City is both an urgent and necessary task, closely aligned with the city's development strategy. Cultural identity must be internalized and embedded in every citizen, transforming into intrinsic strength and determination to successfully advance the city's development. When development goals are achieved, they, in turn, reaffirm the enduring power of Vietnam's cultural identity and the spiritual values that define the people of Ho Chi Minh City.

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