

From propaganda to cultural industry: Recontextualizing socialist visual symbols in Vietnam

Nghiem Thi Thanh Nha

Institutional affiliation: Ha Noi University of Culture, Ha Noi City 100000, Viet Nam

(Corresponding author's e-mail: nhant@huc.edu.vn)

Received: 23 March 2026, Revised: 8 June 2026, Accepted: 7 June 2026, Published: 15 October 2026

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of socialist visual symbols in contemporary Vietnam, focusing on their shift from instruments of political propaganda to resources within cultural and creative industries. Since 1945, symbols such as the red flag with a yellow star, the hammer and sickle and revolutionary posters have functioned as key vehicles of socialist ideology and collective mobilization. In the context of economic reform and globalization, however, these symbols increasingly circulate in commercial and urban everyday settings. Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, the study employs qualitative visual and discourse analysis of approximately sixty photographs and related materials collected in Ha Noi between March and September 2025. It identifies three interrelated tendencies: i) the commodification of socialist symbols as expressions of patriotism and national identity; ii) their aesthetic hybridization with globally circulating retro styles; iii) and a functional shift from ideological communication to cultural consumption. The article argues that Vietnam represents a distinctive trajectory in which socialist imagery remains politically authoritative while simultaneously operating within market logics, mediating memory, identity and commercial value in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Socialist visual symbols, Cultural commodification, Political imagery, Popular culture hybridization, Creative resources

Introduction

Symbols are central elements in constructing cultural meanings and reinforcing political ideologies. In Vietnam, since 1945, socialist visual symbols—such as the red flag with a yellow star, the hammer and sickle, portraits of political leaders and propaganda posters—have played a vital role in political communication, helping to shape socialist identity and foster social consensus. However, in the context of renovation period and globalization, these symbols are no longer confined to official political settings; they increasingly appear in commercial cultural products and public spaces.

This phenomenon raises several key research questions: Why have symbols once associated with authority and solemnity become popular materials in consumer life? What do these forms of recontextualisation reveal about the dynamics of

Vietnam's contemporary cultural industries? And in the process of globalization, how are political symbols negotiated and re-encoded?

To address these questions, this article employs Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theoretical framework, which emphasises the multiplicity of reception and interpretation (Hall, 1980, p. 128-138). The research focuses on Ha Noi—the political and cultural centre of Vietnam—where socialist symbols exist simultaneously in official spaces and diffuse into everyday consumption and creative practices. A qualitative research approach is adopted, drawing on image and archival analysis combined with field observation. This approach allows for an examination not only of the material presence of these symbols but also of the semantic transformations they undergo within contemporary social life.

Literature review

The concept of the symbol has long been regarded as a core notion in the study of the social sciences and humanities. As early as the mid-twentieth century, Ernst Cassirer asserted that human beings are animal symbolism—creatures who create and operate within a symbolic world (Hall, 1980, p.128-138). According to Cassirer, culture is a ‘universe of symbols’ constructed by human beings, encompassing language, art and religion. This notion laid the foundation for understanding symbols as a fundamental mechanism of thought and communication. Meanwhile, Charles Sanders Peirce distinguished three types of signs: the icon, the index and the symbol (Peirce 1931-1958). The icon is based on visual resemblance, the index on causal or contiguous relationships and the symbol on convention and social agreement. Thus, symbols are tied to cultural contexts and social conventions. Whereas indices are directly connected to their referents through causality and icons through similarity, symbols are established by social conventions accepted within a community. This concept is particularly relevant to socialist symbols, which were deliberately constructed within specific historical contexts and collectively received and remembered as part of cultural and collective memory.

Building upon this, Umberto Eco emphasized the polysemy of symbols—the potential for a single image to be interpreted in multiple ways depending on its reception context (Eco, 1976). Eco expanded semiotic analysis into the realm of mass communication, stressing the dynamism and mutability of symbols in modern life. From the late 1970s, Stuart Hall developed the encoding/decoding model, according to which visual messages are ‘encoded’ with the producer’s intended meanings but ‘decoded’ within social life from three positions: dominant- hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional. This theoretical framework is especially useful for analysing how socialist visual symbols in Vietnam are received and re-interpreted by consumers in the present context.

Within a narrower scope, the visual symbol refers to images that convey meanings beyond purely aesthetic value. Eco argued that visual symbols are polysemic and can be decoded differently depending on cultural and social contexts (Eco, 1976). For example, the yellow star on a red background may be decoded both as a

revolutionary emblem and as a decorative motif evoking nostalgia.

In Vietnam, many scholars have explored the study of symbols. Đinh Hồng Hải (2013), through works such as *Biểu tượng trong đời sống văn hóa Việt Nam* (Symbols in Vietnamese cultural life) and his studies on symbolism in contemporary art, affirmed the central role of symbols in reflecting and re-producing cultural identity. He emphasised that symbols are not only associated with religious beliefs and festivals but also play a prominent role in visual and contemporary arts (Đinh, 2013). Trần Ngọc Thêm in *Cơ sở văn hóa Việt Nam* (The foundations of Vietnamese culture), also discussed the function of symbols as vehicles for preserving and transmitting cultural memory (Trần, 2013). Therefore, the concept of the symbol can be viewed as a basic unit within the semiotic system, where an image, object or action transcends its immediate meaning to embody broader symbolic value.

Regarding socialist visual symbols, several domestic studies have focused on specific domains. Hoàng Minh Phúc examined advertising posters, propaganda paintings and woodcut labels from 1946–1954, highlighting the role of imagery as a political propaganda tool and as a formative influence on applied art (Hoang, 2020, p.45-53). Nguyễn-Long Kerry in *Lịch sử nghệ thuật thị giác Việt, một chân trời diễn giải mới* (Vietnamese visual art history: A new horizon of interpretation), proposed reading Vietnamese art history through the lens of visual culture, emphasising the diversity of symbols within shifting cultural and political contexts (Nguyễn-Long, 2023, p. 230-248). More recently, Luong, Huynh and Nguyen approached advertising as a form of visual communication, analysing how symbolic images represent Vietnamese culture in the context of globalization (Luong et al 2023, p.82-97).

Socialist symbolism represents an important branch of research on semiotics and political imagery across former socialist countries. Studies on socialist visual symbols— such as Yurchak in the Soviet context— show that socialist symbols once served to reinforce political ideology but were gradually ‘re-signified’ in everyday life (Yurchak, 2006). Paul G. Pickowicz (Pickowicz, 1991, p. 4-36) as well as Todorova and Gille (Todorova & Gille, 2010) in discussing socialist memory, emphasise their dual

nature: both as propaganda tools and as materials for nostalgia and commodification. In Vietnam, research on propaganda posters, public architecture and fine arts during the resistance period has begun to address socialist symbols as familiar images in public space. However, most of these studies focus on historical and artistic aspects, with few examining the transformation of socialist visual symbols in the contemporary context—particularly as they become cultural products and consumer goods (such as T-shirts, murals, souvenirs).

From this review, two points can be observed: (1) International research has discussed socialist symbolism extensively as a political– cultural phenomenon that evolves over time; (2) In Vietnam, scholarship on socialist symbols has primarily focus on artistic, historical or propagandistic values. There remains a lack of research on the redefinition of socialist visual symbols as cultural products within the market economy. This research gap provides the rationale for the present study, which seeks to understand how contemporary Vietnamese people receive, commodify and reconstruct the meanings of socialist visual symbols in everyday life.

Historical context of socialist visual symbols in Vietnam

This art form emerged when the revolutionary government of Vietnam was established in 1945 and rapidly developed, becoming a leading genre in political communication— serving the struggles for independence as well as the construction, defense and development of the nation. Early painters trained at the *École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine* such as Trần Văn Cẩn, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung, Lương Xuân Nhị, Tô Ngọc Vân, Nguyễn Sáng and Mai Văn Hiến produced numerous propaganda posters that became widely circulated.

The historical development of socialist visual symbols in Vietnam provides an essential context for understanding their presence in contemporary society. This development can be broadly divided into three phases, each characterised by different modes of production and circulation.

Between 1945 and 1986, socialist visual symbols were closely associated with revolutionary propaganda and nation-building. Posters, propaganda paintings and widely recognised symbols such as the red flag with a

yellow star and the hammer and sickle were extensively used in public communication. During this period, red was a dominant visual element, frequently appearing in posters and other forms of visual media. Visual representations often emphasised collective action, labour and military struggle, reflecting the broader political and social priorities of the time. Propaganda images were disseminated through newspapers, public displays and community spaces, serving as a key means of communication between the state and the population.

Following the *Đổi mới*- reforms- initiated in 1986, the visibility and function of these symbols began to change alongside broader economic and social transformations. While they remained present in official and public contexts, they also started to appear in a wider range of everyday settings. The expansion of market activities and changes in media environments contributed to new forms of visual production and circulation.

Since the 2000s, socialist visual symbols have continued to appear across various domains, including design, consumer products and media platforms. Their presence in these contexts reflects broader shifts in cultural production and circulation in contemporary Vietnam. This section does not aim to provide a comprehensive historical analysis, but rather to outline key developments that inform the contemporary uses of socialist visual symbols examined in this study.

Theoretical framework

As mentioned above, in this study, a visual symbol is understood as an image capable of conveying meaning or information visually, using compositional elements such as line, shape, colour and layout to create strong, memorable impressions. It may take the form of a logo, an artwork or any visual element designed to simplify, stylise or abstract a complex concept or object, facilitating recognition and memory. Applied to this research, a socialist visual symbol is defined as an image associated with socialist ideology. Common socialist visual symbols include the hammer and sickle (representing workers and peasants), the five-pointed yellow star (representing workers, continents and revolution), the cogwheel (representing industry), the wreath of rice or wheat (representing agriculture), the rising sun (representing revolution), the flame, the raised hands and slogans such as ‘ *Độc lập*

(Independence)', 'Tự do (Freedom)'. These elements often appear in emblems, national flags, coats of arms and propaganda artworks—especially posters—to express the leadership of the working and peasant classes, the development of industry and agriculture and revolutionary aspiration.

Accordingly, this study is grounded in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model—an influential approach in communication and cultural studies (Hall, 1980, p. 128-138). Hall challenged linear models of communication by emphasising the dynamic and contested nature of meaning-making. According to Hall, messages are not passively absorbed but actively decoded by audiences. Producers encode messages with preferred meanings—those shaped by institutional power, ideology and cultural context. However, audiences decode these messages through their own social positions, lived experiences and cultural capital, generating multiple interpretive possibilities.

Hall identified three basic decoding positions. The first is the dominant-hegemonic position, in which audiences accept and reproduce the preferred meaning, thereby reinforcing the dominant ideology. The second is the negotiated position, in which audiences partially accept the preferred meaning but modify or reinterpret it according to their own circumstances. The third is the oppositional position, in which audiences recognise the intended meaning but reject or invert it, producing counter-readings. This typology underscores the polysemous nature of cultural and media texts.

Building upon Hall's encoding/decoding model, this study employs the notion of *re-encoding* to emphasize that socialist visual symbols in contemporary Vietnam are not merely reinterpreted by audiences but are actively reproduced, redesigned and reinserted into new cultural and commercial contexts. While Hall's encoding/decoding model primarily explains how meanings are produced and interpreted, the contemporary circulation of socialist symbols in consumer culture involves an additional process in which cultural actors—designers, businesses, creative producers, and consumers—generate new layers of meaning and embed them into products, spaces, and visual practices. Therefore, the notion of re-encoding is used to capture this dynamic process through which political symbols are transformed from ideological

communication tools into cultural commodities and aesthetic resources.

Applied to socialist visual symbols in Vietnam, this framework illuminates their recontextualisation within contemporary cultural industries. Originally encoded as tools of political communication and ideological legitimization, symbols such as the hammer and sickle or the red flag were designed to generate dominant-hegemonic interpretations. However, as they shift into the realm of cultural consumption—appearing on souvenirs, T-shirts, or café decorations—they are decoded through diverse interpretive practices.

Comparative cases further demonstrate the framework's relevance: phenomena of 'Ostalgia' or 'Nostalgia' in Eastern Europe reflect negotiated and oppositional readings after the collapse of socialist systems; in contrast, in China, red tourism is state-directed toward hegemonic interpretations. The Vietnamese case reveals a hybrid trajectory: socialist symbols remain embedded within official discourse yet are simultaneously re-encoded by grassroots communities as cultural commodities. Hence, Hall's theoretical model serves as a vital analytical tool to trace how political imagery is continually reproduced within the interplay of cultural practice and market logic. Situating the concept of the visual symbol within Hall's encoding/decoding framework (Hall, 1980, p. 128-138) allows for an explanation of the semantic shift from official political discourse to everyday cultural life, as well as the potential hybridization with elements of global culture.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design focusing on visual analysis and document analysis, combined with field observation. This approach was selected to capture the recontextualisation of socialist visual symbols within the contemporary cultural space of Vietnam without relying on interview data.

Research data were collected between March and September 2025 in Ha Noi—a city that concentrates numerous public spaces and commercial venues where socialist symbols appear. Primary objective of this paper is not to examine individual perceptions or subjective attitudes toward socialist symbols, so that it focuses on the material and visual recontextualisation of these symbols within urban cultural space, embedded in

commodities and public displays. A collection of approximately 60 photographs was gathered to document the presence of these symbols in everyday life. As the researcher is based in Ha Noi, field observation was conducted with an awareness of positionality, acknowledging both familiarity with the cultural context and the need for critical analytical distance. The images were taken at souvenir shops, cafés, online stores and public spaces across five central wards of Ha Noi, including Hoàn Kiếm, Cửa Nam, Ba Đình, Hai Bà Trưng and Đống Đa. These photographs reflect the diversity of expressive forms, ranging from commercial products (T-shirts, handbags, wallets, hats, posters, keychains, magnets, charms, bracelets, rings, lighters and so forth) to decorative elements in urban spaces. The photographic dataset was constructed through purposive sampling. As the researcher is based in Ha Noi, field observation was conducted with an awareness of positionality, acknowledging both familiarity with the cultural context and the need for critical analytical distance. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the research sought to capture the diversity of symbolic manifestations across different commercial and public contexts. The intention was not to create an exhaustive inventory of all occurrences but to identify recurring patterns and meaningful deviations within the contemporary visual landscape. While interviews could provide valuable insight into individual motivations, they might also shift the analytical focus toward personal narratives rather than the broader structural transformation of symbolic circulation. The present study deliberately concentrates on observable visual practices in order to trace how socialist imagery functions within the logic of cultural industries.

In addition, to complement visual analysis, the study draws upon secondary sources, including published interviews with designers, media articles and promotional materials. These sources provide contextual information regarding the motivations behind the reuse of socialist imagery without transforming the study into an interview-based project. The propaganda paintings, posters, periodicals and archival images from the earlier socialist period is compared with contemporary imagery made it possible to identify transformations in aesthetics, function and symbolic meaning over time.

Data analysis was conducted in two complementary directions: (1) visual analysis, aimed at identifying motifs, colours, design styles and modes through which symbols were re-created in cultural products; and (2) discourse analysis of media materials, promotional texts, or product descriptions, to elucidate the layers of meaning associated with the consumption and interpretation of symbols. All data were thematically coded, combining an inductive approach derived from field data with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, thereby explaining the diversity in the reuse and re-interpretation of socialist symbols.

Regarding research ethics, this study adheres to the principles of respect and confidentiality of data sources. All photographs were recorded solely for academic purposes, not for commercial usage and all documentary materials were cited in accordance with international academic standards.

This methodological approach allows the study to capture not only the material presence of socialist visual symbols but also their contextual transformation—from instruments of political communication to cultural consumption products in contemporary urban Vietnam.

Results

Analysis of images, documents and field observations reveals that the recontextualisation of socialist visual symbols in contemporary Ha Noi occurs along three prominent trajectories.

First, there is a trend to refresh the socialist visual symbols as a national character expressing love for the country and the Fatherland.

As mentioned above, socialist visual symbols commonly include the hammer and sickle (representing workers and peasants class), the five-pointed yellow star (representing workers, continents and revolution), the cogwheel (representing industry), the wreath of rice or wheat (representing agriculture), the rising sun (representing revolution), the flame, the raised hands and slogans such as '*Độc lập* (Independence)', '*Tự do* (Freedom)' — all regarded as sacred emblems. Previously, these socialist visual symbols were permitted to appear only on badges, national flags and the national emblem and were placed in solemn, official locations. They were also extensively used in propaganda art to represent the leadership of the

working and peasant class, the development of industry, agriculture and revolutionary aspiration.

The concept of propaganda here refers to persuasion and mobilization through multiple means—such as advice, printed materials, images, or theatrical works—to attract and inspire participation in socio-political activities. To achieve its communicative purpose, propaganda painting is characterised by focused and concrete artistic imagery; its composition is simple and its colour palette vivid as well as vigorous, with red—the colour of revolution—as the dominant hue. This was not merely for aesthetic reasons but carried deep ideological, cultural and psychological

resonance. In socialist art, particular emphasis was placed on the meanings of the Party flag with the hammer and sickle and national flag with five-pointed yellow star on the red. The Party flag, considered sacred and noble, bears a bright red background symbolising enthusiasm and revolutionary spirit. The golden hammer and sickle crossed diagonally express the unity between the working class and peasantry, representing the Vietnamese people building socialism together. Red is symbolic of blood, fire, revolution and unwavering faith in victory. Other commonly used colours include yellow and military green, often rendered in bold contrast.



Figure 1 Revolutionary propaganda poster (1970s)

A defining feature of propaganda art is its directness and non-verbal clarity: the visual and textual elements must be extremely concise, powerful, easy to understand and memorable. As shown in Figure 1, socialist visual symbols functioned as instruments of ideological mobilisation, characterised by heroic composition and collectivist imagery. Among these socialist visual symbols, the Party flag has been subject to strict regulations on design and usage. On February 27, 2023, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam issued Regulation No.99 on the Party flag and its usage. This was the first official regulation specifying the Party flag's design standards, eligible users and application rules. The regulation

defines that the Party flag is rectangular, with a width equal to two-thirds of its length, featuring the hammer and sickle emblem in the middle. The hammer and sickle are placed at right angles, without overlapping lines at their intersection. The diameter of the emblem equals four-tenths of the flag's width. The hammer leans upward at a 45-degree angle from the horizontal and the sickle stands perpendicular to it. The handles are rectangular; the top of the hammer aligns with the tip of the sickle blade; and the bottom edges of both handles align horizontally. The background is pure red, identical to the national flag and the hammer-and-sickle emblem is bright yellow, matching the five-pointed yellow star

of the national flag. The Party flag may be made from high quality materials such as fabric, paper or metal.

However, in recent years— particularly during major national commemorations such as the 50th Anniversary of National Reunification (1975-2025) and the 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1945- 2025)—there has been a significant transformation in the contexts where socialist visual symbols are used. No longer confined to official or solemn settings, these symbols have been extensively appropriated as intellectual property (IP) resources within the cultural industries.

The photographs collected in this study reveal that familiar motifs such as the yellow star, hammer and sickle, portraits of leaders and propaganda slogans are now used as decorative patterns across a wide range of commercial products (T-shirts, handbags, wallets, hats, posters, scarves, bazaar- style shawls, keychains,

magnets, charms, bracelets, rings, lighters, video games and so forth) as well as in urban public spaces, cafés and restaurants. A souvenir chain such as TiredCity in Hoàn Kiếm Ward—central Ha Noi—displays retro-style T-shirts printed with the red flag and yellow star, reflecting a hybridization between patriotism and global design language. Alongside major apparel brands such as Canifa and Boo, numerous smaller labels—Trang Bui, Tòhe, Lam Mơ, Rooté—have simultaneously released collections of scarves and T-shirts featuring the red flag and yellow star. Handicraft and jewelry companies such as Lam Phong, Xưởng Bạc, The Craft House and Loca Bee produce handbags, wallets, hats, posters, keychains, magnets, charms, bracelets, rings and lighters decorated with the national flag, pith helmets or familiar slogans such as ‘Độc lập’ (Independence) and ‘Tự do’ (Freedom).



Figure 2 Contemporary commercial use of socialist imagery

Although more than sixty photographs were initially collected, a process of qualitative filtering was undertaken. Many products displayed highly similar compositions or repetitive uses of identical motifs, particularly the yellow star on red backgrounds. Following purposive sampling, the dataset was refined from 60 to 55 images through theoretical saturation and analytical quality screening. As mention above, five images were excluded because they duplicated existing symbolic patterns across similar product categories, did

not contribute additional analytical variation after saturation had been achieved. The remaining fifty-five images, which exhibited distinct aesthetic variations, product categories, and contextual placements, were selected for detailed analysis. This process follows the principle of theoretical saturation commonly applied in qualitative research, whereby additional data no longer generate new analytical categories. Among the selected commercial products, the yellow star appeared most frequently (55/55 images), followed by slogans and

textual elements such as “Độc lập” and “Tự do” (39/55 images), portraits of political leaders (2/55 images), and the hammer-and-sickle symbol (7/55 images).

Thus, when compared with propaganda posters from earlier periods, a clear transformation can be observed: from direct forms of political propaganda—typically positioned in prominent locations and carrying a solemn, authoritative tone—to graphic designs applied to commercial products and public leisure spaces. In these new contexts, the imagery functions in a more evocative manner, stimulating sentiments of patriotism in the young.

Second, the aesthetic hybridization and globalization of imagery. Visual analysis reveals that

many contemporary designs blend socialist motifs with elements of international popular culture. For example, revolutionary red tones are paired with pop-art graphics; the hammer and sickle are stylised into playful icons on stickers, T-shirts or car decorating. Such hybridization transforms solemn political emblems into marketable products imbued with humour, cheerfulness and global appeal. Whereas 1960s propaganda posters emphasised the hammer and sickle as symbols of class struggle, today’s souvenir stickers depict them as cute cartoon forms—signifying a desacralisation within the context of consumer culture.



Figure 3 Decorated car in Hanoi street

The retro quality evident in the Figure 3 does not simply replicate historical socialist imagery; rather, it selectively re-stylises it through contemporary graphic design practices. The saturated red-yellow colour palette, flat colour blocking, simplified figurative illustration and banner-style typography all evoke the visual language of mid- to late-twentieth-century propaganda posters. However, these elements are presented in a clean, digitally refined form, lacking the material textures, printing imperfections or visual density associated with historical posters. This produces a curated form of nostalgia in which socialist visual language is detached from its original political urgency and reintroduced as an aesthetic resource. When applied to modern consumer products such as a privately owned urban vehicle, T-shirts, handbags, wallets, hats, posters,

scarves, bazaar-style shawls, keychains, magnets, charms, bracelets, rings, lighters, video games and so forth the imagery generates a form of temporal layering, juxtaposing revolutionary visual heritage with contemporary consumer culture. In this context, retro operates less as the modern consumer products for historical memory and more as a heritage-style aesthetic that is compatible with tourism branding, youth-oriented consumption and the commercial circulation of patriotic sentiment.

Third, the functional shift from politics to cultural consumption. Comparison of contemporary images with archival materials shows that socialist symbols have moved beyond the political realm—where they once reinforced ideology—into everyday life as cultural products. These symbols now appear not only in official

state events but also organically throughout urban spaces from cafés to art studios. In modern design, traditional red remains present but is softened with pastel tones or combined with pop-art patterns, indicating a shift from solemnity to fashionability. This illustrates a process of re-encoding, wherein signs of ‘revolutionary spirit’ are transformed into aesthetic language and tools for personal expression in contemporary cultural life.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that socialist visual symbols in Vietnam are no longer confined to their role as instruments of propaganda but are being restructured into creative resources within the cultural industries. They carry both mnemonic and aesthetic value, reflecting society’s adaptive reuse of political imagery.

This recontextualisation also raises questions about intellectual property (IP) rights. As symbols once belonging to the official political sphere are now commercially exploited, the boundaries between collective heritage and individual creative ownership have become increasingly blurred. This provokes an important issue: who holds the right to control, register and benefit from the commercial use of socialist symbols?

Discussion

The findings indicate that socialist visual symbols in contemporary Vietnam have undergone a profound process of re-encoding, shifting from instruments of political propaganda to sources of cultural and creative value. This transformation can be effectively interpreted through Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding framework.

In earlier historical periods, when symbols such as the yellow star, the hammer and sickle, or the portraits of political leaders were produced and disseminated by the state, their meanings were ‘encoded’ in a singular direction—to affirm the legitimacy of socialist ideology and to mobilise collective consensus. This corresponded to the dominant-hegemonic decoding position, in which audiences accepted the meanings established by the producers in their entirety.

However, analysis of contemporary imagery reveals a diversity of decoding practices. On one hand, a nostalgic decoding (another form of dominant or negotiated reading) can be identified when these symbols are used to evoke the past and reaffirm national

cultural identity. On the other hand, the hybridization of these symbols with pop art, fashion or global design demonstrates a commercial decoding, in which original meanings are restructured to align with aesthetic preferences and consumer demands. Notably, this process situates Vietnam within a trajectory that is both similar to and distinct from other formerly socialist countries. In Eastern Europe, the phenomena of Ostalgia or post-socialist nostalgia express a reflective yearning for the past, while in China, red tourism reaffirms official ideological meanings. The Vietnam case, however, represents a form of double hybridity: the symbols continue to exist within political rituals while simultaneously being re-interpreted in consumer life and the cultural industries. This reflects a unique context in which official and commercial spheres coexist and complement one another.

Therefore, Hall’s encoding/decoding framework not only explains the plurality of symbolic reception but also provides insight into the dynamics of Vietnam’s cultural industries. The process of re-encoding demonstrates that these symbols possess vitality beyond the political domain, reflecting the creative agency of cultural actors within globalization. The author argues that it is important to clarify that globalization in this context does not imply imitation of, or adherence to, Western models. Rather, it refers to the process by which socialist imagery enters a global visual economy. In other words, these symbols are not becoming “Westernised”; instead, they are being reformulated so that they can circulate within transnational systems of design, branding and consumer culture. Globalization here denotes a shift in modes of circulation and consumption, whereby historically specific political imagery is transformed into an aesthetic resource capable of operating within broader global markets and visual conventions.

Particularly within the conditions of cultural industry development, socialist symbols have come to embody not only aesthetic expression but also a form of non-traditional intellectual property (IP) resource. Their use in cultural products raises critical policy questions: Should such symbols be regarded as commons, belonging to collective heritage, or as registerable and protectable IP assets? However, it is evident that this transformation creates the conditions for proposing these symbolic systems as shared cultural assets—a

form of local aesthetic resource. With their distinctive visual characteristics and their capacity to evoke history and national identity, these symbols have the potential to differentiate cultural products. When creatively and appropriately valorized, they can contribute to processes of value creation and enhance the competitiveness of cultural industries.

Conclusion

This study has elucidated the transformation of socialist visual symbols in Vietnam—from instruments of political communication to cultural products embedded in contemporary life. Through the analysis of images, archival materials and field observations, the research identified three major tendencies: the commercialisation of symbols as patriotism, the aesthetic hybridization within the flow of globalization and the functional shift from political propaganda to cultural consumption.

The findings contribute to international discussions on the recontextualisation of political symbols within cultural industries. The Vietnamese case demonstrates a distinctive trajectory: Rather than disappearing, socialist symbols have been recreated, simultaneously reaffirming official identity while expanding into creative and commercial domains. This reflects not only the dynamism of Vietnam's urban culture but also the potential of symbols as a key resource for developing the creative cultural industries.

Beyond its academic contribution, this study also offers practical implications. The appropriation of socialist symbols as an intellectual property (IP) resource within the creative industries raises an urgent need for a legal framework that both protects the symbolic values and promotes responsible, sustainable commercialisation.

Nevertheless, the research has certain limitations, particularly due to its focus on Ha Noi and its reliance primarily on visual and archival data. Future research could expand beyond Ha Noi by conducting comparative studies across other urban contexts, particularly Ho Chi Minh City and other regions of Vietnam. Such comparisons would help determine whether the observed processes of commodification, aesthetic hybridization, and symbolic transformation represent national trends or remain shaped by specific local cultural and historical contexts.

Overall, the study affirms that in contemporary Vietnam, socialist symbols are not merely remnants of historical memory but living cultural resources that enrich the nation's aesthetic, economic and creative life.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025 version) solely to assist with language editing. All ideas, analyses, interpretations and conclusions presented in this article are entirely the author's own responsibility.

CRediT author statement

Nghiem Thi Thanh Nha: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – Original draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision.

References

- Cassirer, E. (1944). *An essay on man: An introduction to a philosophy of human culture*. New Haven, United States: Yale University Press.
- Đinh, H. H. (2013). *Biểu tượng và văn hóa: Một số vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn* [Symbols and Culture: Selected Theoretical and Practical Issues]. Ha Noi, Vietnam: National Political Publishing House.
- Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington United States: Indiana University Press.
- Hall, S. (1980). *Encoding/Decoding* (pp. 128-138). In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Vols. 1–8). Cambridge, United States: Harvard University Press.
- Hoàng, M.P. (2020). Nghệ thuật tranh cổ động Việt Nam giai đoạn 1946–1954: Từ tuyên truyền cách mạng đến mỹ thuật công cộng [Vietnamese Propaganda Posters (1946-1954): From Revolutionary Propaganda to Public Art]. *Art Magazine*. (8), 45-53.
- Luong, T. B. T., Huynh, N. T., & Nguyen, T. T. N. (2023). *Visual communication: Exploring representations of Vietnamese culture in advertising* (pp.82-97). In *Proceedings of the*

- ICTE Conference. Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam:
Van Lang University.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2002). Showing Seeing: A Critique
of Visual Culture. *Journal of Visual Culture*,
1(2), 165-181.
- Nguyễn-Long, K. (2023). Reading Vietnamese Art
History through the Lens of Visual Culture.
Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 54(2), 230-
248.
- Pickowicz, P.G. (1996). Socialist Cultural Construction
and the Chinese Cultural Revolution: Radical
Rhetoric and Ritual in the Yangbanxi. *Modern
China*, 17(1), 4-36.
- Sturken, M. & Cartwright, L. (2018). *Practices of
looking: An introduction to visual culture* (3rd
ed.). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford
University Press.
- Todorova, M.& Gille, Z. (2010). *Post-communist
nostalgia*. New York, United States: Berghahn
Books.
- Trần, N. T. (2013). *Cơ sở văn hóa Việt Nam*
[Foundations of Vietnamese Culture]. Ha Noi,
Viet Nam: Viet Nam Education Publishing
House.
- Yurchak, A. (2006). *Everything was forever, until it
was no more: The last soviet generation*.
Princeton, United States: Princeton University
Press.