

CULTURE

Building the symbol field of Đồng Tháp lotus flower

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Abstract

The lotus flower is essentially a natural gift to people from different cultures, from East to West, from ancient times to modern times. Lotus flowers have the property of living in muddy and watery environments, rising strongly and blooming purely in the sun, and thus forming a symbol of many beautiful and noble emotions. In Vietnam, there is no place like the lowlands of Đồng Tháp (the Đồng Tháp Mười Basin) that fully integrates the basic elements of nature, humanities and culture, adapts and harmonizes to each other to form a lotus symbol field. This paper uses Louis Hjelmslev's (1899-1965) concept of "logistics" in symbolic interpretation, combined with the three pillars of value proposed by UNESCO for heritage in contemporary life, to discuss ecological and human resources through comparative relevance to related cultures and to construct the symbolic field of the lotus flower in Đồng Tháp province. Therefore, the lotus symbol of Đồng Tháp is a unique product of the flood-prone basin of Đồng Tháp Mười (Đồng Tháp Province), with a historical and cultural heritage of nearly two thousand years, and is closely related to the local culture and social background. This study proposes four basic values in the lotus symbolic domain of Đồng Tháp: harmony, beauty, purity, and blessings.

Keywords: lotus, symbol field, philosophy, Đồng Tháp, trademark

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1. Introduction

The lotus has evolved from a flower in nature to an active key symbol entering the cultural world by virtue of its biological habit of "growing out of mud without being stained (*gần bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn*)". The lotus, with its concepts of rebirth, purity, nobility, and virtue, has permeated the cultures of ancient Egypt, India, China, Vietnam, and some other Southeast Asian countries. The lotus symbol was once chosen as the national flower by Indians and Egyptians. It is one of the representative flowers of Buddhism. Historically, many poets and scholars in East Asia and Southeast Asia have used the lotus as an important theme in their literary and artistic works. It can be seen that the lotus soon became a universal cultural symbol for all mankind. How, then, did the lotus become a symbol that encompasses the unique characteristics of a place, or a specific land, such as the flood-prone lowland basin of Đồng Tháp province?

The lotus has become a cultural symbol because of its biological habits, which is related to the natural environment in which the lotus is cultivated and protected and the livelihood context of local social groups. Different communities choose one feature of the lotus to emphasize and symbolize as a symbol of one or more specific cultural concepts. The ancient Egyptians emphasized the image of the lotus rising from the lake, breaking through the water and blooming, symbolizing the rebirth of life from the primordial cosmic lake (Phan et al. 2019). Indians compare the purity of the lotus to the holy mountain(s) where gods and/or Buddhas reside (the Himalaya) (Phan et al. 2019). In addition to emphasizing the purity and nobility of the lotus, the Chinese also pay attention to the compatibility of the lotus stem and lotus root growing at the same time, believing that this is a manifestation of the concept of "three lives and three worlds (三生三世 sān shēng sānshì, *tam sinh tam thế*)" (see Section 2 of this article). The differences in the cognition, selection and interpretation of the symbolic meaning of lotus among different cultures constitute what we call the "symbolic field of lotus (trường biểu tượng của hoa sen)". In the academic forum, there has been a wealth of research on the symbolic meaning of the lotus and its imprint in the cultural life of various cultures/countries, but no work has yet proposed the concept of "the symbolic field of the lotus" and analyzed and evaluated it.

Đồng Tháp is the hometown of lotus in the subconscious mind of the southern Vietnamese folks and even the whole country. It has all the ecological, historical and cultural conditions to make the lotus symbol a distinctive cultural symbol, which is not only conducive to

promoting the spirit of unity and pride among the people of the province, and their love and attachment to the motherland, but also directly continues to create employment opportunities and develop the local economy. To this end, Đồng Tháp needs to establish *a strong lotus symbol field* with a rigorous, objective, scientific and concrete theoretical and practical foundation system. This paper applies Louis Hjelmslev's (1899-1965) concept of "logistics" in symbolic interpretation and UNESCO's ESE (economic, social, environmental) value framework to analyze the components that make up the symbolic field of lotus flower, providing a scientific basis for building the Đồng Tháp lotus cultural brand.

2. The symbolic meaning of the lotus in representative world cultures

The lotus symbol is found in most major cultures of the world, especially ancient Egypt, India, and China.

Among the ancient Egyptians, the lotus was considered a sacred flower associated with the sun god Ra/Horus, a symbol of the sun and life and the desire for rebirth and immortality in humans and all living things (Ward 1952, pp.135-146). Chapter 81 of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead writes that the lotus, like humans, is rooted in the soil, grows in water, and finally blooms in the sun, making it a symbol of self, in which, the soil provides material resources for the self's physical body, and the water is the "sea of worldly experience" that the self experiences in reincarnation. The self that later emerges into the sunlight (rebirth) is likened to a more perfect "material-mentality" entity, fully integrated with wisdom and life energy. The ancient Egyptians wrote in their Book of the Dead that the spirits of the dead must speak out: "I am a pure lotus, rising in the sun. I carry the message of Horus, the god of the Sun!" and/or "I am the pure lotus of the Kingdom of the Sun!" (see Mysticism Lecture Hall, 2022). The lotus symbol was found in Tutankhamun's tomb, with his body and head adorned with it. It is said that when the lotus breaks through the earth, beautiful young men and women rise from its sepals. The lotus blooms most beautifully at dawn and dusk, leading people to associate it with the sun god and the light emitted by the "black mud" at night (Yang 2020, pp.14-19).

In Indian Hinduism, the lotus symbolizes immortality and the rebirth of all living things. Sacred mountains such as Mount Meru are compared to pure, clear, eternal lotus petals (Phan et al., 2019). The creator god Brahma, the protector god Vishnu, the goddess Lakshmi and the god Kubera are often depicted sitting on lotuses. Hindus believe that the lotus represents a symbol of capturing the energy that flows through the chakra (the spinning cosmic wheel) toward the divine world when the individual self merges with the greater cosmic self. The

lotus has been also seen as “the first-born of creation and as the magic womb of the universe and the gods” as well as the symbol of fertility, longevity, knowledge, and wealth (Kandeler & Ullrich 2009, p.2462-3; see further Xi, 2016). Hinduism believes that every person possesses a sacred, noble lotus soul in their mind.

Buddhists pay special attention to the lotus' habit of breaking through the muddy water and blooming with fragrance and flawless beauty. In Buddhist faith, the Buddha “strode over seven lotus flowers when he was born” and has been popularly depicted as sitting on a lotus flower (Majupuria & Joshi 1989; Beuchert, 2004; Kandeler & Ullrich 2009, p.2463). Since then, the lotus has been chosen as a symbol of enlightenment and liberation, a symbol of the Buddha's bodhicitta and wisdom, and a symbol of everyone's ability to practice and observe the precepts regardless of their surrounding conditions and life circumstances. Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra (蓮花經, Liên Hoa Kinh) preaches that all sentient beings, no matter who they are or what Buddhist sect they belong to, have the ability to practice and attain enlightenment. According to Zen Buddhism (禪宗, Thiền tông) legend, Gautama Buddha used the lotus as a "guide" to impart wisdom to his disciple Mahākāśyapa (Ma-ha-ca-diếp), paving the foundation for the formation and development of Zen Buddhism (Nguyễn 2017). Therefore, the lotus is also a symbol of eternal wisdom. The Yogis use a crown shaped like a blossoming lotus bud (nasturtium bud) as a symbol of perfect mastery of sadhana/cultivation. At this point, the lotus has the symbolic meaning of "self-transcendence", physical, moral, spiritual cultivation and the ability of human self-enlightenment. In Jainism, Tirthankaras (Master Monk who transcended the cycle of samsāra) are also depicted sitting on lotus.

In general, Indians generally believe that the white lotus symbolizes purity, perseverance, and self-cultivation; the pink lotus symbolizes rebirth and the original beauty of the universe and humanity; the red lotus symbolizes victory over adversity and rebirth, passion, and the bold expression of human creativity.

In Chinese culture, the lotus is not only integrated into folk consciousness, but also into philosophical schools such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. More than 2,500 years ago, Confucius wrote in a poem: “彼澤之陂，有蒲與藺，有美一人，碩大且卷” (The Book of Songs/詩經 Kinh Thi), meaning that “On the other side of the pond, the lotus flower tree is in full bloom; There is a beautiful woman, (if not met) how sad and sorrowful!” In Chinese mentality, the lotus grows out of the mud but remains unstained, it is pure and fragrant, symbolizing the virtues of a gentleman. Consequently, Lotus has become one of the four symbolic flowers in Chinese culture: spring orchid, summer lotus, autumn chrysanthemum

and winter plum. There were often lotus ponds or lotus basins in the center of the palaces and manors of ancient Chinese nobles, which were intended to remind every member to cultivate and maintain personal virtues.

Chinese Buddhism was introduced from India, so the symbolic meaning of lotus in Chinese Buddhist culture also inherited the Indian heritage. In addition, Chinese Buddhist monks and believers developed the symbolic meaning of the lotus into the concept of “three lives and three worlds” (三生三世 sān shēng sānshì, tam sinh tam thế) by focusing on the facts that lotus flowers bloom on the water, buds grow on the mud, and its roots mature under the mud. The details that lotus flowers bloom, bear seeds, and develop its roots at the same time have developed into the concept of “cause and effect co-existence” in the Chinese outlook on life. People's emphasis on the hollow characteristics of leaves, flower stems, etc. has also formed the concept of “vacuity (emptiness)/sūnyatā (性空 xìngkōng, tính không)” or “creating something out of nothing (無中生有 wúzhōngshēngyǒu, vô trung sinh hữu)”. The work *Compilation of the Tripiṭaka* (三藏法数 Sānzàng fǎshù, Tam Tạng Pháp Số) describes 10 symbolic characteristics of the lotus, including: staying away from the mud, being not associated with evil, exuding a sweet fragrance, possessing pure essence, having beautiful radiant look, being soft but not wrinkled in nature, bringing blessings to the viewers, always getting full bloom (which symbolizes the practitioner's achievements, wisdom, and full blessings), being mature and purified, and being born with temperament/inborn ideals (Xi, 2016). In Chinese tea art, lotus tea symbolizes the harmonious state between man and the universe, the spirit of svabhāva (self-being or own-being/自性 zìxìng, tự tính) and self-improvement (自度, zìdù, tự độ), and the determination of moral self-cultivation.

Westerners have considered that the lotus was a symbol of the evangelist in Christianity, although they later replaced it with the water lily (nymphaeaceae, hoa súng). They compare the lotus to a symbol of naturally-born beings, which embodies strong temperament and vitality. The Church of St. Mary in Ephesus (built in 431 AD, Greece) was constructed with the image of lotuses. Lotus leaves, flowers, and fruits are also found at the central arcade of Panagia Theotokos (built in 450–460 AD, now Panagia Achiropiitos) in Thessaloniki (see Kandeler & Ullrich 2009, p. 2463). In contemporary Western culture, people rarely refer to the lotus symbol that originated from ancient Greek culture, but instead adopt the lotus symbolism of the Asian Buddhist culture.

In contemporary society, especially among young people, the lotus symbolizes purity,

strength and tenacity, and also embodies the concepts of elegance, nobility, feminine beauty and tenderness, happiness and prosperity. The similarities between the contemporary and traditional meanings of the lotus symbol lie in the philosophy of life, aesthetic education, and self-cultivation of individual and collective ethics and morality. In the contemporary spiritual world, whether from a religious or philosophical perspective, the lotus emphasizes the desire for spiritual purification and the improvement of the purity of the human soul.

3. Lotus in the culture of the Đồng Tháp flood-prone lowland Basin

The lotus has been present in the flood-prone lowland basin of Đồng Tháp since at least 1,800 years ago and is associated with the formation and revival of the small swamp state that was a vassal of the Kingdom of Funan. A Sanskrit stele found in Đồng Tháp Mười, dating from the 8th-9th century AD, records that a prince from the Funan Kingdom was sent to explore new territories in this flooded basin and built a group of Brahmanic temples to facilitate the religious life of the local residents/devotees (see *Hành trình văn hóa Óc Eo (The journey of Oc Eo culture) – Volume 2: Chinh phục đầm lầy (Conquering the Swamp)*, VTV9, 2018). Another earlier stele, the Cái Tàu Hạ stele in Đồng Tháp (7th century - currently on display at the Vietnam History Museum - Ho Chi Minh City)¹, has a very vivid lotus pattern carved on its surface. As discussed in Section 2 of this article, the lotus early became a symbol of the sacred and enlightened spiritual world; therefore, there is no doubt that the lotus has been present in Đồng Tháp Mười Basin (Đồng Tháp) since the Funan prince built temples there in the 2nd century AD.

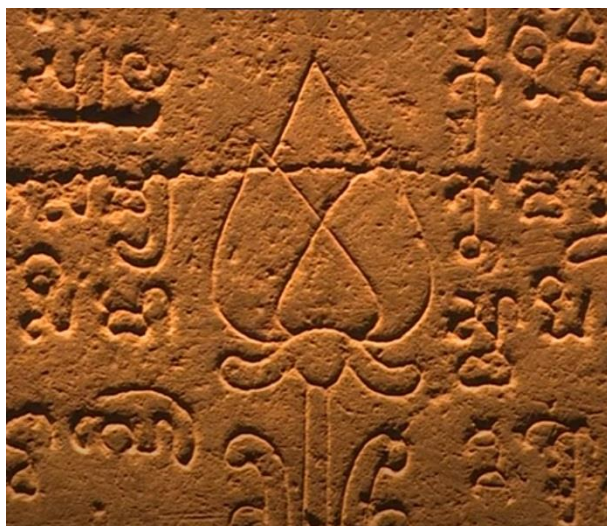


Figure 1: Lotus pattern on the Cái Tàu Hạ stele in Đồng Tháp (Source: captured from clip Hành trình văn hóa Óc Eo (The journey of Oc Eo culture) – Volume 2: Chinh phục đầm lầy (Conquering the Swamp))

Over time, the lotus adapted well to Đồng Tháp's swampy terrain and was adopted and preserved during the settlement of the Vietnamese people centuries ago. For the residents of Đồng Tháp, the lotus is not just a flower or a simple symbol, but also a friend, a means of

¹ The author would like to thank M.S. Nguyễn Hữu Lộc, a staff member of the Vietnam History Museum - Ho Chi Minh City, for providing information.

livelihood, and the material with which they weave a rich and colorful folk culture that is simple and pure, yet noble and refined. The lotus has long been treasured by Đồng Tháp Mười people:

“Tháp Mười đẹp nhất bông sen
Việt Nam đẹp nhất có tên Bác Hồ”

English translation: “In Tháp Mười, the most beautiful flower is lotus; And the most beautiful Vietnamese name is Hồ Chí Minh” (Vietnamese folk song)

Although relatively new to the history of development in the Mekong Delta, the Đồng Tháp Mười Basin is home to residents of most of the major religious and philosophical faiths in the region and the world: Indian Brahmanism with Óc Eo ancient culture, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism of local Vietnamese and Chinese ethnic groups, Theravada Buddhism of the ethnic Khmer (living west of the Đồng Tháp Mười Basin). In Cao Lãnh, Sa Đéc or Hồng Ngự urban areas, there are more Catholic and Protestant believers. However, as analyzed in Section 2, there is no difference or conflict between these ideologies in the way they interact and interpret the symbolic meaning of the lotus. The people of Đồng Tháp today have inherited all these traditions.

In intangible culture, the lotus symbol continues to play an important role in the cultural consciousness of faith and religion-related philosophical schools such as Buddhism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa Buddhism, as well as the Đồng Tháp resident community. Residents of Thanh Bình and Tháp Mười districts still pass on a story of *Quan lớn Sen* (*General Sen*), telling about the filial piety of King Gia Long (1762-1830, r. 1802-1820; the founder of the Nguyễn Dynasty) in the early 19th century. The legend said that King Gia Long was busy with state affairs, so he ordered Official Sen to receive and take care of his mother. Official Sen served her lotus tea every day, and was highly praised by the king's mother and respected by local people. The lotus tea in this folk story symbolizes the desire for "filial offsprings and family harmony" (*tử hiếu, gia hòa*) in the folk consciousness of the Đồng Tháp Mười basin.

Inspired by the pure beauties of the lotus, people from Đồng Tháp and neighboring areas wrote 133 poems, which are included in the poetry collection “*Vũ khúc Sen* (Lotus dancing songs)” (see Tao Đàn 2023), contributing to the poetry of this flood-prone flower in Đồng Tháp (see further VOH 2023). The Đồng Tháp lotus appears in floral decoration art (e.g., Spring Festival, lotus festival, and so on), house architecture, artistic decoration of temples and shrines, and in local folk songs and dances, and has an invisible connection with the local

people's traditional culture and customs. The land, swamp, sunshine, lotus and people of Đồng Tháp are integrated into one, turning lotus into a kind of special flower: the flower of heaven and earth, and the flower of people's hearts.

In terms of tangible culture, it can be said that lotus has contributed almost everything to Đồng Tháp people: lotus seeds, lotus rootlets, lotus roots used to cook local delicacies; lotus cores, lotus fragrance, and lotus essential oil for making lotus tea/sesame oil; lotus leaves for wrapping rice balls; lotus stem silk for weaving into lotus silk, and so on. Lotus rootlet salad, lotus tea, lotus seed sweet soup, lotus seed vegetarian crisps, lotus seed & taro ball cakes, lotus seed milk powder, etc., together create the style of Đồng Tháp lotus dish. Many local businesses have been working hard to market the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol (e.g., the *Hương Sen Tháp Mười* Lotus Tea in Thanh Bình District – fieldwork note, 2023), contributing to the local lotus brand. According to Lê Hoàng Vũ (2023), Đồng Tháp province plans to increase lotus cultivation to 1,300 hectares in Tháp Mười, Tam Nông, Cao Lãnh, Tân Hồng, and Lấp Vò districts, with production exceeding 1,000 tonnes by 2021. This is one of the five industries (rice, catfish, floral flowers, ornamental plants, and lotus) that the province is working to restructure the local agricultural sector.



Figure 2: *Hương Sen Tháp Mười* lotus tea

(Source: khonggiantraviet.com)



Figure 3: Đồng Tháp lotus-baby symbols

(Source: www.brandsvietnam.com)

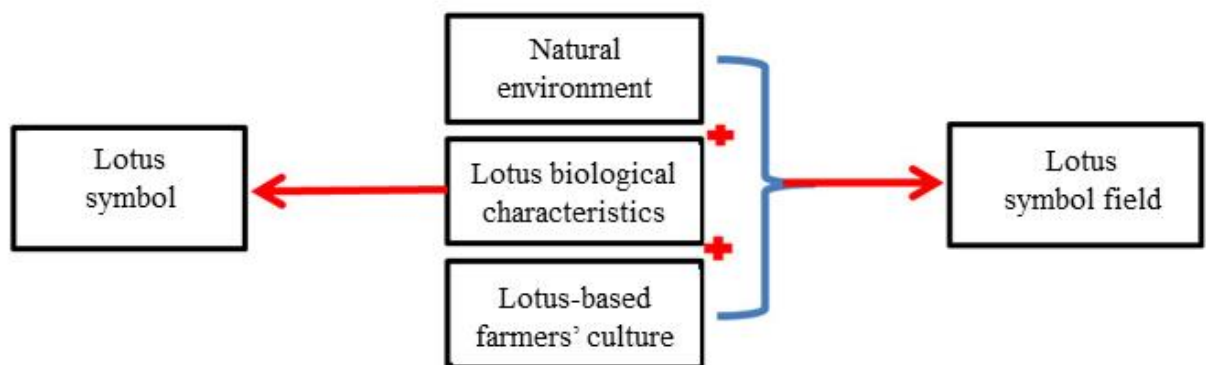
By comparing the symbolic meaning of the lotus that appears in the representative cultures analyzed in Section 2, we can see that the lotus of Đồng Tháp not only integrates the cultural concepts of most major religious and philosophical contexts (Brahmism/Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, folk beliefs), but also is close to and dependent on the daily life of local residents (in economic activities, livelihood, daily life). In order to make the Đồng Tháp lotus a unique symbol of the region, we need to build a special lotus symbol field that is closely related to the flooded land of Đồng Tháp Mười and the same

flavor cannot be found elsewhere.

4. From the lotus symbol field to the Đồng Tháp cultural brand

The lotus symbol field, or the lotus symbolic meaning field, It is an organic system of symbolic meanings associated with the lotus/lotus varieties based on (1) the natural ecological environment in which the lotus grows, (2) the lotus's biological habit combination, and (3) the socio-religious and spiritual life, lifestyles, and livelihoods of the communities that interact with the lotus/lotus variety. The symbolic meaning of the lotus in the world's major cultures analyzed in Session 2 is mainly based on the natural habits of the lotus species (emphasizing one or several typical features), while the construction structure of the lotus symbolic meaning field must take into account the above three factors. This means that we have to place the lotus/lotus species in the specific habitat of the subject community under study (in this study, in the natural-cultural context of the Đồng Tháp Mười lowland basin).

Figure 4: Lotus symbol and lotus symbol field



Source: author, 2024

Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965) proposed the concept of "logistics" of symbolic meanings when discussing the different meaning fields of a symbol under different interpretation perspectives. Accordingly, the "logistics" of symbols are only accurately valued in defining the symbol in specific context and perspective. Therefore, the "logistics" of a symbol can only be accurately evaluated when the symbol is defined in a specific context and perspective. He believes that interpreting the "logic" of symbolic meaning requires considering the "relational logistics" between symbols and the context, natural environment, social and historical field in which they are located, and the groups that own/use the symbols. Hjelmslev is particularly concerned with analyzing the deep connotation of a symbol (i.e., its explicit, systematic meaning) rather than its "surface" (the purpose or meaning signified by the symbol) (Hjelmslev 1953; see further Parret 1983). If a symbol is completely placed in the living situation of community A', it can be understood according to the symbolic field A. If it is placed in the interactive

relationship of the community B', it can be understood as the symbolic field B. Once a symbol moves from context A to context B, the initial symbolic field A also moves and eventually transforms into the symbolic field B. The meaning field of a symbol is formed and relatively fixed in a clear well-organized structure. It is closely related to the context, ecological and cultural environment in which the symbol is located, and takes effect. Therefore, the symbol field is a structural system that represents the compatible, coherent and relatively fixed relationship between the physical form of the symbol and the meaning structure (or meaning field), which is closely related to the natural and social context of the community using the symbol.

What makes a symbol different from a symbol field is that it can be absorbed and spread by target groups in other cultural contexts, and its symbolic meaning can be partially changed due to the influence of new contextual scenes. At the same time, the symbolic field has a relatively fixed form in the "relational logistics" of relevant elements, so when the symbol is placed in different life situations in different communities, the original symbolic field will collapse. The Japanese Zen tea art would fail to convey its true meaning if performed in Vietnam or China. In cultural exchanges, when a borrowed symbol gradually merges and closely interacts with the new life context, that is, when the new symbolic meaning field firmly forms a strict, symbolic structural framework, the symbol can become a new symbolic field in the new context. For example, Kubera, the symbol of the God of Wealth in Indian culture, was passed on to China and then to Vietnam. Influenced by the historical and cultural background and Vietnamese cultural psychology, this god transformed thoroughly to become the Thánh Gióng symbol field in Vietnamese culture (see Dinh 2015, pp. 117-136). Similarly, Japan's Zen Buddhism, although influenced by Chinese culture, has also developed into a symbolic field with a unique Japanese identity; the Hindu monkey god Hanuman was accepted by the Chinese and was largely transformed into the humanistic Monkey King (孫悟空 Sūnwùkōng, Tôn Ngộ Không) with Chinese characteristics in Wu Chengen's *Journey to the West* (西遊記 Xīyóu jì, *Tây Du Ký*); The Holy Child Jesus was borrowed from Spanish culture by the Filipino people of the Cebu region during colonial times, but later developed into their own symbol: a patron saint and god of wealth (fieldwork note, 2017), etc.. It can be seen that when we study and/or evaluate a symbol field, we cannot separate it from the cultural context in which the symbol exists.

The symbolism of the lotus has many similarities across cultures because it stems from the basic biological characteristics of the lotus: it [the lotus] grows from the soil but is pure, fragrant, beautiful, strong, blooms, and so on; however, the symbol field of the lotus flower

varies from culture to culture. However, through the evaluation of philosophy, religion, literature, art, the living environment and cultural psychology of indigenous peoples, we can see that the lotus symbol in ancient Egyptian culture is related to the cycle of the Nile River flood and drought environment and the strong belief in soul rebirth and immortality. Indians who believe in Brahmanism/Hinduism or Buddhism establish an interactive relationship between the lotus symbol and the majestic Himalayan nature and people's absolute belief in supernatural forces (God, Buddha, and others) to achieve the fusion of the individual soul with the greater self or escape nirvana. Chinese people emphasize moral education, and therefore attach great importance to using the various biological habits of lotus to metaphorically represent life ethics. So what are the different attributes of the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field?

The lotus symbol field the author analyzes in this article is fully consistent with the ESE (economic-social-environmental) value analysis framework of UNESCO for assessing the vitality and sustainable effectiveness of cultural heritage. UNESCO recommends that cultural heritage in contemporary life needs to fully express three basic values at the same time, including economic (E), social (S) and environmental (E), that is, it contributes economic value, participates in promoting the process of local social and cultural progress (i.e., civilized lifestyle, social equality/gender equality, dialogue-based critical thinking, multicultural thinking, etc.), and has practical significance for protecting the ecological environment (see Purvis et al. 2019, pp. 681–695). Therefore, when analyzing the structure of the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field, we integrate it into this ESE framework:

Table 1: The element structure of the lotus symbol field according to the ESE analysis framework

<i>The ESE analysis framework</i>	<i>The lotus symbol field</i>	<i>Elements of the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field</i>
Environment	Suitable ecological and natural environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Đồng Tháp Mười the flood-prone basin (low-lying, flooded areas with abundant fresh alluvial deposits).
	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Folk culture: “growing out of mud without being stained”. • Buddhism: <i>svabhāva</i> (self-being or

Society	significance and social value stem from the biological habits of lotus	<p>own-being/自性 zìxìng, <i>tự tính</i>) and <i>self-improvement</i> (自度 zìdù, <i>tự độ</i>), self-purification of ethics and mentality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confucianism: moral self-cultivation. • Taoism: living a life of <i>inaction</i> (無為 wúwéi, <i>vô vi</i>) according to the way of heaven and earth ("creating something out of nothing (無中生有 wúzhōngshēngyǒu, <i>vô trung sinh hữu</i>)"). • Brahmanism/Hinduism: ancient Óc Eo cultural heritage with nearly 2,000 years of history. • Christainity: messenger of good news.
Economy	Lotus-related lifestyles and livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lotus-based farming; lotus delicacies, lotus silk, Đồng Tháp lotus community-based tourism available in the local and regional economic map.

Source: author, 2024

In order for the lotus symbol field of Đồng Tháp to be recognized and developed, the lotus in the province needs to be matched with cultural concepts and cultural brands. Cultural philosophy should be built on the above ESE analysis framework. Then the lotus grows from the waterlogged soil, rises from the water, and blooms in the sunlight. This is the convergence and harmony of the *Three Powers* (三才 Sāncái, *Tam tài*): Earth (土 Tǔ, Thổ) – Water (水 Shuǐ, Thủy) – Fire (火 Huǒ, Hỏa, indicating the sunlight and year-round climate). These three elements combine and interact with each other to make the flowers grow and develop, embodying the philosophy of "**Harmony**" (Hòa, 和). "Harmony" is also a symbol of the lotus's compliance with nature, reflecting the harmonious and tolerant attitude of the residents of the Đồng Tháp lowland basin towards nature from generation to generation. In an era when the ecological environment is constantly changing in a negative direction (e.g., climate change, deforestation, etc.), a "**Harmony**" also means "Victory (Thắng lợi)". Therefore, the lotus symbolizes the concept of adapting to nature and caring for the ecological environment.

Secondly, in culture, the lotus has the biological characteristics of being untainted by mud and flourishing and fragrant, and is likened to the life philosophy of self-cultivation and self-improvement, which can be summarized into two philosophical concepts: "**Beauty**" (**Mỹ**, 美, indicating the physical beauty of lotus and its mental elegance) and "**Purity**" (**Thanh**, 清, indicating the requirement and ability to achieve purity through self-purification and cultivation of human morality). The biological beauty of the lotus is pure beauty, and when it is brought into the realm of the lotus symbol field of Đồng Tháp, it represents the pure beauty of the soul, the noble spirit of virtue and kindness (corresponding to the habit of "growing out of mud without being stained"). The value **Beauty** (**Mỹ**) of the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field is also the moral code and spiritual life of contemporary life. It has the function of inspiring people to cultivate their character and become people with the essence of the lotus symbol. This ability to "cultivate the body and cultivate virtue" is a manifestation of the value **Purity** (**Thanh**) symbolized by the lotus. **Purity** (**Thanh**) is not only a kind of moral and spiritual "purification", but also a state of spiritual integrity and enlightenment, a "perfect" and "pure" essence.

In people's livelihood and economic life, lotus is closely related to daily life and has become an important source of livelihood for local people. It can be generalized as the philosophy of "**Blessing**" (**Phúc**, 福) or "Happiness", "Good fortune". The lotus and its resources are gifts from the floodplains of Đồng Tháp; the lotus farmers inherit blessings and are the ones who continuously sow blessings in the lotus fields for themselves and their descendants. The concept of "**Blessing**" is also the driving force that pushes lotus farmers to continue to retain their traditional occupations while creatively utilizing lotus resources to create more products that serve life. It is the process of utilizing the Earth's blessings and replicating it as additional blessings for human creation.

To sum up, the cultural and economic significance of the Đồng Tháp lotus from the birth of the species to the human world can be summarized into four basic values: *Harmony* (Hòa), *Beauty* (Mỹ), *Purity* (Thanh), and *Blessing* (Phúc).

Table 2: Đồng Tháp lotus cultural philosophy under the ESE analysis framework

<i>Environmental values</i>	<i>Socio-cultural values</i>		<i>Economic values</i>
	Biological nature of lotus	Lotus symbolism in culture	
Harmony (Hòa)	Beauty (Mỹ)	Purity (Thanh)	Blessing (Phúc)

Compared with the lotus symbols in ancient Egyptian, Indian and Chinese cultures, the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field has its own unique features:

Table 3: Comparison between the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field and the lotus symbol in typical cultures of the regions

<i>Elements</i>	<i>Ancient Egypt</i>	<i>India</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Đồng Tháp (Vietnam)</i>
<i>Natural environment</i>	The Nile Valley has a 6-month flood cycle and a 6-month drought cycle throughout the year.	The majestic Himalayas	Ponds, lakes, lagoons (small, scattered, atypical)	The unique marshland of Đồng Tháp Mười (ponds, lakes, marshes, seas, lakes, and waterlogged fields).
<i>Cultural values through lotus symbol</i>	Rebirth and immortality of the soul	Divinity, the realm where the individual self merges with the Great Self (Brahmanism/Hinduism), the realm of transcendence, Nirvana (Buddhism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secular life: spiritual uplift, symbol of virtue (Confucianism and Taoism); • Spiritual life: close to Buddhist mentality (like in India) 	Combination of layers/lines with Indian and Chinese cultural symbolism based on Vietnamese folk culture
<i>Economic values</i>	unclear	unclear	unclear	Lotus cultivation has become a livelihood for many people and plays an important role in the local economy.

Source: author, 2024

Japanese Zen tea culture is world-famous for its four basic philosophical values: harmony (和 *Hòa*), respect (敬 *Kính*), purity (清 *Thanh*), and tranquility (寂 *Tịch*) (see Phạm 2014, pp. 104-112). When introducing and promoting tea culture to the public, the Japanese advocate combining the four values into a comprehensive system to create the Japanese Zen tea symbol field. It is believed that Đồng Tháp Province (and the whole Vietnam in general) has a complete scientific basis and practical conditions to adopt similar strategies to promote the local lotus symbol field. Among the four philosophies of harmony, beauty, purity and blessings, the philosophies of Beauty (*Mỹ*) and Blessings (*Phúc*) have demonstrative (explicit) attributes, while the philosophies of Harmony (*Hòa*) and Purity (*Thanh*) are more abstract (or implicit). If we do not fully recognize and promote the explicit and implicit dual structure of these four values, the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field will be unsustainable, and the lotus symbol of this land will lose most of its significant values and cultural significance.

Under the cultural concept is the cultural brand/slogan, which is popularly used to promote the local brand. Đồng Tháp Province has used the slogan "As Pure as a Lotus (*Thuần khiết như hồn sen*)" for many years, which is mainly related to the "Purity (*Thanh*)" philosophy in the above four philosophical spectrums, focusing on the deep beauty of the mind, soul and abilities of self-awareness, self-purification and personal virtue of each person's soul. Strategy must be combined with practice; once the local concept and cultural brand are thoroughly selected and applied, the residents of Đồng Tháp must be inclusive and must understand and appreciate the resource culture associated with their noble lotus flowers. They must govern themselves according to the values and beauty of their motherland and establish their own corresponding lifestyle, spirituality and personal virtues. In addition to traditional publicity and education measures, the province should also "artify" social and cultural activities to publicize and promote the image, philosophy and cultural brand of the Đồng Tháp lotus symbol field to the public across the country. For instance, Đồng Tháp should produce special popular films that contain lotus philosophy and the spiritual beauty of lotus farmers (such as the film "I saw yellow flowers on the green grass/*Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh* dedicated to Phú Yên province), compose excellent songs that fit the trend of popular culture (such as singer Quách Beam's *Hà Giang ơi*), build the Lotus Museum to exhibits photography, paintings, poetry related to lotus, as well as images of folk cultural activities related to lotus and lotus cultivation: lotus field life, lotus-based cuisine, lotus silk-making arts and clothes, etc. Whatever the approach or strategy, Đồng Tháp province needs to be mindful of the integrity of the local lotus symbol field (avoiding the use of random meaning(s)) in order to

respect the particularity and uniqueness of their motherland's products compared to lotus symbols in other cultures such as India or China.

Conclusion

Lotus is a natural and cultural gift from the flood-prone basin of Đồng Tháp Mười to the people of Đồng Tháp province and all over Vietnam from generation to generation. With its unique biological characteristics, the lotus has become a cultural symbol of human philosophy, a metaphor for a transcendent state and the ability to cultivate one's character. This system of meaning is universal from the East to the West, from ancient times to the present, so the Đồng Tháp lotus needs to have its own symbolic foundation. According to the concept of symbolic "logistics" of Louis Hjelmslev, the Đồng Tháp lotus has its own special symbol field. In the ESE analysis framework of UNESCO, the Đồng Tháp lotus embodies the four basic philosophies of *Harmony*, *Beauty*, *Purity*, and *Blessing* (*Hòa*, *Mỹ*, *Thanh*, *Phúc*). Đồng Tháp province needs to develop a strategy to elevate the local lotus image to a special symbol field with a complete philosophical structure and value, rather than just a random symbol./.

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