

The art of decoration screen in Vietnam, similarities and differences with East Asian countries

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(Received 10 Juni 2023; revised 08 January 2025; accepted 09 January 2025)

Abstract

As a unique art form that has existed for quite a long time in Vietnam, the screen originated in China through exchanges with East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The screen represents a beauty of the culture of East Asian countries in general, of Vietnamese traditions in particular.

Used quite commonly in our country's social life in architecture, the initial appearance of the screen may be closely related to the art of feng shui, but when it is socialized, the screen becomes a product. The product has both practical meaning and spiritual value. Types of interior screens (interior projects) and exterior screens (foreign case/external projects) are important components in architectural space design and display decoration.

Sticking with social life, along with material and spiritual activities, and the ups and downs of people in society. Through documents and fieldwork, research on the decoration of Vietnamese screens in the context of East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Korea shows that decorative forms have similarities and differences. Specific - Through decorations, it is possible to recognize aspects of social life such as living habits, feng shui conceptions, spiritual life, issues of culture and custom... and also partly imprints of art through the ages.

From a modern perspective, the screen is still used to decorate the interior and exterior spaces of significant architectural works such as communal houses, temples, pagodas, hotels, offices,... private residences, garden houses, family churches, tombs, houses... and along with many new decorative forms of the screen, also left cultural imprints of each country and period in each country - every country in East Asia.

Keywords: screen, internal project, foreign project, East Asian culture

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Screens are feng shui objects that encompass functional, aesthetic, and spiritual values that have long existed in the lives of Vietnamese people. In traditional architecture, screens are indispensable, ranging from exterior (outside interiors) to interior (within interiors). Each screen captures the marks of its era and the aspirations of individuals and serves as valuable material contributing to studying the development of Vietnamese Fine Arts throughout historical periods.

Like other traditional cultural products, the decorations on traditional screens are often symbolic. They reflect the desires and aspirations of people in society from ancient times to the present day. The decorative content of screens is generally rich and multidimensional; screens are used not only to address feng shui and functional issues but also as works of fine art, deeply imbued with historical and cultural values, as noted by researcher Phan Thanh Hai: "Every time we stand before them, we often feel as if enchanted and captivated. It's unclear whether it is because they are too beautiful or because they have somehow gathered the mysterious elements of feng shui"¹. Each screen is like a piece of visual art; many screens have become actual art pieces, bringing distinctive characteristics to the decorative art style.

The themes and decorative motifs depend significantly on societal influences, as well as the perceptions, beliefs, and ideologies of the creators... these factors directly lead to the themes, content, and patterns of the screen.

The term screens in French is referred to as *Paravent* (pa-ra-vang), and in English, it is called *Windscreen* or *Screen*. In Catholic churches, *screens* are referred to as *Pulpitin* or *Rood screen*, a term in architecture in England, France, and the Netherlands (circa 1530-1535), referring to the part above the partition separating the sanctuary (for clergy) and the choir area in Catholic churches². In China, the country that originated *screens*, the term is written as 屏 (píng fēng). It is a compound word, with 屏 meaning "shield" and 风 meaning "wind," which together translate to "windshield"³. In Japan, *screens* are transliterated as *Byobu*, a Japanese term encompassing an enclosed space or shelter. *Byo* means "to ward off," and *bu* means "wind," collectively signifying "protection from the wind." It translates to "wind wall."

¹ Phan Thanh Hai (2005), "*Bình phong trong kiến trúc truyền thống Việt*" (Screens in Traditional Vietnamese Architecture), *Song Huong Journal*, (195), May 2008, source: <http://www.vanhoahoc.vn/nguyen-cuu/van-hoa-viet-nam/van-hoa-nhan-thuc/1959-phan-thanh-hai-binh-phong-trong-kiem-truc-truyen-thong-viet-nam.html>, [07/4/2011 19:26].

² Chilvers, I., Osborne, H., & Farr, D. (1994). *Art Dictionary*. Oxford University Press.

Le Thanh Loc (Trans.). (1997). "*Tu dien My thuat*" (Art Dictionary), NXB Van hoa thong tin, pp. 940-941.

³ Artist Dang Dinh Diep, Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts (1958-1965), University of Industrial Fine Arts, fr: 2010.

Screens can be categorized into two basic types to differentiate between interior and exterior screens in architectural spaces: 1) *Exterior Screens*: These are placed outside architectural structures and are permanently fixed. 2) *Interior Screens*: These are placed within interiors, are not fixed, and can be moved. They are also known by other names such as "Wind-blocking screen" or "Guardian of the Hidden Gate"... This article primarily focuses on the decoration of screens to explore the similarities and differences in screen decoration between Vietnam and other East Asian countries during the medieval and early modern periods, as well as some contemporary changes in the use of screens in modern life in Vietnam.

The development process of Vietnamese screens is genuinely challenging to study due to the natural laws of decay, the impact of environmental factors, war destruction, the lifespan of the objects, and even improper restoration. As a result, few valuable records from researchers related to screens remain, which serve as precious materials demonstrating their existence in tradition and allowing later generations to reconstruct the development process of screens partially. The presence of screens dating back to the medieval and early modern periods aligns with the developmental trajectory of those in other East Asian countries.

1. The Emergence of Screens in East Asian Countries and Vietnam

According to the research of Dr. Chu Dong Il, a scholar of literature at Seoul National University: "The term East Asia includes (A) China - Korea - Japan, or (B) China - Korea - Japan - Vietnam... (C) China - Korea - Japan - Vietnam and several other Southeast Asian countries, which are also considered part of East Asia. In this case, East Asia is distinguished from South Asia or West Asia."⁴ He also noted, "Both East Asia and Europe are civilizations. Civilization emerged during an appropriate period referred to as the medieval era."⁵

Researchers agree that screens originated in China. "The earliest folding screens in China date back to the 8th century CE, although they have been depicted even earlier, with evidence found in Han Dynasty tombs as early as 200 BCE."⁶

- **Chinese Screens**, According to several Chinese sources, screens date back to the 4th to 3rd centuries BCE during the Zhou Dynasty, and these were single-panel screens. The first widespread use of folding screens began during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Screens have been found in tombs from the Han Dynasty, such as one in Zhucheng, Shandong

⁴ Chu Dong Il (2000), "*Ly luan nen van minh Dong A – Nghiien cuu Van hoa*" (Theory of East Asian Civilization - Cultural Studies). H. M. Thanh (Trans.). Nxb Hoi Nha Van (2015), p. 17

⁵ Ibid., p.11

⁶ *History of the Chinese Folding Screen*, (April 21, 2021), Retrieved from <https://www.entissu.com.au/post/history-of-the-chinese-folding-screen>

Province. To this day, some screens from the 8th century, made from paper, still exist. Ancient Chinese regarded screens as a human achievement, considering them an essential part of traditional furniture and a "work of art".

- **Korean Screens**, from prehistoric times, Korean art has been closely connected with Chinese culture. Koreans learned to select and adapt beneficial influences from China while integrating them with their traditions. Consequently, Korea became a bridge, filtering and transmitting Chinese civilization to Japan. Screens, too, traveled from China through Korea and eventually to Japan.

- **Japanese Screens**, Screens "were first imported into Japan from China during the 8th century"⁷. Another source provides information that during the Unified Silla Dynasty (668–935), one of the famous art pieces of Korean art was the *Shakyamuni Triad Screen*, a wooden screen gifted by the Silla royal court to the Japanese imperial court. This event also marked the introduction of screens in Japan⁸.

- **Screens in Western Countries**, In Western countries, the term "screen" refers to partitions separating the sanctuary (reserved for clergy) from the nave (for the congregation) in Catholic church architecture during the 15th century⁹. To this day, screens of this carved type from the medieval period still exist in England. Excellent examples are iconic representations of one of the most flourishing periods of screen development during the Middle Ages.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, screens imported from China to Europe, particularly admired by the French, were regarded as a unique form of art that did not conform to the existing frameworks of Western art. Later, Europeans adapted the painted content on these screens to better suit their lifestyle needs. Many Western screens were evaluated as true works of art. Even today, Western screens remain fundamentally characterized by rationality and logic; their form reflects the perspective of pictorial art, with little attention given to dividing panels in the composition. Historical murals and stained glass art influence their content from the 18th century.

- **Screens in Vietnam**, According to historical records, screens from the Tran Dynasty (13th–14th centuries) are believed to be the earliest Vietnamese screens, marking the beginning of their use by the Vietnamese people. On these Tran Dynasty screens, the concept of decoration involved representing a selected and refined version of nature; thus, painted screens were regarded as the

⁷ *The Magnificent History of Japanese Screens*, (November 20, 2021). Retrieved from <https://hyperallergic.com/689811/the-magnificent-history-of-japanese-screens/>

⁸ Huynh Ngoc Trang (1995), *Asian Fine Arts*, NXB My thuat

⁹ Chilvers, H., Osborne, H., & Farr, D. (1994), *Oxford Dictionary of Art*, Oxford University Press.

standard of natural beauty. Educator Chu Van An expressed this aesthetic notion of “beauty like a painting” in his writing:

*"Layers of mountains crowd and rise like a painted screen,
The afternoon sunlight shines down, illuminating half the stream..."¹⁰*

During the Tay Son era, the decoration of the Phu Xuan Citadel through painted screens on paper was recorded as follows: "Nguyen The Lich, under the order of King Quang Trung, composed eight Nom poems inscribed on eight interconnected painted screens depicting 100 children, to adorn the Phu Xuan palace. The paintings have been lost, leaving only the Nôm poems inscribed on the paintings, which describe the scenes in a very general manner"¹¹.

Through visual source materials, such as 19th-century “Dong Ho” and “Hang Trong” paintings, sketches, drawings, photographs of daily life... the existence of screens has been partially documented.



The folk painting "*Danh ghen*" from the Hang Trong painting tradition (late 19th century) and the printed folk painting series "*Tu binh – Truyen Kieu*" from the Dong Ho painting tradition (17th century) – image source: “*Net đẹp của tranh Đông Ho, di sản văn hóa Việt Nam*” (The Beauty of Dong Ho Paintings, Vietnam's Cultural Heritage) Source:<http://didulich.net/french/news/92/content/2861/net-dep-cua-tranh-dong-ho-di-san-van-hoa-viet-nam.aspx>

Over the 143 years of the Nguyen Dynasty (1802–1945), numerous artifacts were created, marking the period’s historical and cultural significance. Among these, screens—from exterior to interior—remain in considerable numbers, offering a vivid reflection of the concepts and uses of screens during this era. From the perspective of feng shui principles, Mount Ngu Binh was regarded by the people of Hue as a natural screen shielding the Imperial Citadel. Similarly,

¹⁰ Chu Quang Tru (1976), “*Painting and Decoration*”, *Fine Arts of the Tran Era*, NXB Van hoa, Hanoi, Institute of Arts - Ministry of Culture, p. 79

¹¹ Chu Quang Tru (1992), “*Sculpture and Painting*”, *Hue Fine Arts*. Institute of Fine Arts - Hue Monuments Conservation Center, p. 103

Mount Ba Vi was considered a protective barrier for the Thang Long Citadel. Artificial exterior screens, such as walls blocking entrances or hedges of clipped tea plants shaped like screens, were designed for feng shui purposes. However, depending on the social class, these screens' decoration styles and sizes varied, adding to the richness of screen art and imbuing each decorative motif with hidden values and meanings.



Mount Ngu Binh, the screen (first barrier layer) for the Hue Imperial Citadel, source: Researcher Phan Thuan An.



Mount Ba Vi, the protective barrier for Thang Long Citadel – Hanoi (Source: fr 2013 and https://www.flickr.com/photos/kun0_8x/5618368544/)

The research of Leopoldo Cadière, a French priest, conducted during his time in Vietnam, focused on the country's customs, traditions, and cultural records. In his book *L'art de Hué* (*The Art of Hue*), published in 1919, although limited in scope, it is considered one of the most valuable studies on exterior screens in Hue before 1954. The author wrote about the screens of Hue, their variations, construction materials, and types of decorative patterns and included illustrative drawings.



Screen at the Institute of Privy Council – Tam Toa, 23 Tong Duy Tan, Thuan Thanh Ward, Hue City (Source: Hand-drawn illustrations by Cadière in *Les Amis du Vieux Hué* and field research photographs from Hue, July 2012)

For interior screens, stemming from the discretion inherent in the lifestyle of East Asians, Vietnamese people created the "screen" as a functional object for daily life. Its purposes include creating private spaces within larger interior areas, enhancing the beauty of the space, and serving as a status symbol showcasing the wealth and authority of the owner. At the same time, it reflects cultural etiquette in everyday life. Interior and protective screens, as well as Guardian screens from the Nguyen Dynasty, remain relatively intact. They are displayed at the Hue Imperial Antiquities Museum, the Vietnam History Museum, and several other museums in Hai Phong, Nam Dinh, and Da Nang. They are also part of the collections of antique collectors. Notable interior screens at the Hue Imperial Museum include *Ha Thanh Danh The*, *Thien Tu Tu Than*, and intricately designed screens lacquered with red and gold, woven with bamboo, red stone, or carved lacquer... These magnificent, elaborate, and highly sophisticated screens are renowned relics of the Nguyen period, bearing both material and spiritual significance and embodying profound meanings. The emergence, existence, and evolution of screens, with new variations in later periods to adapt to modern life, are why Vietnamese screens continue to endure as timeless cultural artifacts.

2. Similarities in the Decoration of Vietnamese Screens and East Asian Countries

At the Third East Asian University Conference held in Hanoi on November 24–25, 2001, Professor Phan Huy Le presented a scientific report titled *The East Asian Attributes of Vietnam*. In it, he stated: "The scope of East Asian cultural space encompasses the four countries of China, Korea (including North Korea), Japan, and Vietnam. Of course, each country, depending on its geographical, historical, and cultural exchange relations, has different ties to Northeast Asia or Southeast Asia... Throughout the historical progression of ancient and medieval times, due to the increasing influence of Chinese culture, Vietnam has adopted many East Asian attributes shared by other countries in the East Asian region"¹². Therefore, the influence of East Asian cultural assimilation in Vietnam is inevitable. As a result, the decorative patterns on screens reveal a certain level of similarity among the screens of East Asian countries.

The art of decoration originates from the concept of screen usage

The influence and cultural similarities between Vietnam and China are highlighted in the *Study Abroad Handbook*, which discusses shared cultural traits between the two countries. For instance, regarding Confucianism: "Introduced to Vietnam during the Northern

¹² Phan Huy Le (2001), "*The East Asian Attributes of Vietnam*", *Journal of Science, Vietnam National University, Hanoi*, Social Sciences and Humanities, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, 2002.

domination period, Confucianism was officially recognized by the Ly Dynasty when they constructed Văn miếu Quốc Tử Giám to honor Confucius. During the Le Dynasty, it became the dominant ideology of the ruling class, terms of architecture and painting: "There is a blend of Chinese architectural styles. Vietnamese painting has absorbed Chinese influences while achieving its own unique accomplishments..."¹³. Japan and Vietnam: "Both countries in the past were influenced by Confucian and Buddhist cultures from China. In modern times, they also absorbed Christian culture from the West..."¹⁴.

In the Vietnamese perspective on the use of screens, there are many similarities with East Asian countries. As researcher Phan Thanh Hai observed: "The Vietnamese, deeply influenced by Chinese civilization and feng shui principles, have, from a very early period, incorporated screens as an indispensable part of their homes."¹⁵. From the screens that existed in the form of woven bamboo or rattan panels, locally referred to as "*dai*" or "*gai*" depending on the region, their functions have been deeply integrated into Vietnamese life. These screens were used to shield against rain, sunlight, or harsh winds blowing directly into the house, block unfavorable views facing the house's entrance, and prevent direct sightlines into the main room... They also created diverging paths (redirecting entryways) when stepping into the home... Thus, screens have become an indispensable element of traditional Vietnamese architecture.

Just as the screens initially originated in China, Vietnamese screens were first used in feng shui, serving the roles of "*trieu*" (gathering) and "*an*" (shielding) to protect an architectural structure. The use of screens for family estates (*duong gia*) and tombs (*am phan*) stemmed from the theories of *Trieu* and *An* in feng shui. *Trieu* means "to return, to face," derived from the term *Trieu son*, referring to mountains facing or bowing toward the house or tomb—symbolizing a reciprocal relationship between host and guest. Screens inside the house (*noi an*) served to block or shield against excessive external energy (*truc xung*), protecting the homeowner from harm and ensuring peace for the family by preventing negative energy from entering the house.

In Vietnam, Hue is the place that retains the most diverse styles of screens. Not only in imperial architecture but also in royal tombs, mansions, clan temples, communal houses, and

¹³ Study Abroad Handbook, "Cultural Similarities Between Vietnam and China", Source: <https://duhocchd.edu.vn/cam-nang-du-hoc/net-tuong-dong-van-hoa-viet-trung-n4052.html>, [June 13, 2019].

¹⁴ Tran Thi Hoa, "Some Reflections on Cultural Similarities and Differences Between Vietnam and Japan", *Journal of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City*, October 16, 2021.

¹⁵ Phan Thanh Hai (2009), "Screens in Traditional Vietnamese Architecture", *Song Huong Journal*, Issue 195, May 2009. Source: <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c142/n1475/Binh-phong-trong-kien-truc-truyen-thong-Viet.html>, [15:48 | 02/03/2009].

shrines... screens adorned with intricate decorations are ubiquitous. The decorative motifs often feature *Long Ma* (Dragon Horse), a symbol unique to Hue. To the west of Hanoi, in *Thap Tam Trai* (13 hamlets) and Le Mat village (Gia Lam), Hanoi, the screens are adorned with tiger images, depicting either one tiger or five tigers. Along the To Lich River (now in Hoang Mai and Thanh Tri districts), several exquisite *ngoai an* screens remain, often found in places commemorating mandarins of past dynasties or individuals who contributed to the country and hailed from the region. Thus, the decorative motifs of each screen reflect distinct features rooted in the beliefs and cultural practices of their respective regions and eras.

From the earliest days of screen origin to the feudal periods, feng shui theory emerged, and screens became an indispensable part of traditional architecture, regardless of scale. To adapt to living habits, Vietnamese people synthesized experiences and developed diverse, rich concepts in their application. This is evident in poetic verses handed down over generations, such as:

*“Dien tien huu an tri thien kim,
Vien hi te mi can ung tam.
An nhuoc bat lai vi khoang dang,
Trung phong pha hoai hoa tuong xam”*

Translated:

*“Before the hall lies a screen worth a thousand gold.
From afar, it aligns with the brows; up close, it centers the heart.
If the screen fails to bring expansiveness,
The central room will be destroyed, and calamity will soon follow.”*

Or:

*“Ngoai son tac an diec kham cau
Quan bao nguyen cau khi bat luu
Tung huu huyet tinh vo can an
Trung phong dien bai tau tha chau”¹⁶*

Translated:

*“A distant mountain serves as a screen, but not one to be relied upon
Encircling the vital spirit, yet the energy cannot flow*

¹⁶ Phan Thanh Hai (2009), “Screens in Traditional Vietnamese Architecture”, *Song Huong Journal*, Issue 195, May 2009. Source: <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c142/n1475/Binh-phong-trong-kien-truc-truyen-thong-Viet.html>, [15:48 | 02/03/2009].

Even with a perfect site, without a nearby screen

The family will scatter in chaos, fleeing to distant lands”.

This concept reflects certain similarities and adaptations of Vietnamese screens when Ly Vuu of China summarized during the Eastern Han dynasty, writing the *Screen Inscription*:

<i>“Abandoned, it evades,</i>	<i>It blocks evil winds,</i>
<i>Used, it opens up.</i>	<i>And shields from dew and frost.</i>
<i>Standing, it must be upright,</i>	<i>It respects the higher and shields the lower,</i>
<i>Placed, it must be fair.</i>	<i>Without deviating from propriety.”¹⁷</i>

The Vietnamese have used screens flexibly to adapt to the environmental climate, incorporating feng shui, spiritual beliefs, and cultural etiquette. For instance, bamboo or rattan panels shield homes from rain and sun, while interior screens behind the main entrance block direct sightlines and "sha chi" (harmful energy). This practice also reflects cultural behavior, preventing outsiders from looking straight into the house's center, where the ancestral altar is traditionally located. Visitors are expected to walk around the screen rather than enter directly through the middle.

The Vietnamese concept of using screens reveals certain similarities with China, the original birthplace of screens as feng shui objects designed to block negative energy and protect architectural structures. Similarly, on the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa, Japan), horizontal panels at doorways remain common, serving both spiritual purposes to ward off bad omens or impure air and practical purposes to block harsh winds from entering homes. In the historic village of Hahoe in Andong City, South Korea, screens still exist in traditional houses, placed right behind the main gate, between the primary and auxiliary houses. This reflects a shared concept of án (barrier) and subtle differences in how exterior screens are positioned in Korean architecture compared to other East Asian countries.



¹⁷ *Folding Screen - Ping Feng*, source: <http://www.chinacient.com/folding-screen-ping-feng/>.

Screens of Ryukyu Houses on Okinawa Island, Japan, and

Screens of Traditional Doorways in the Ancient Village of Andong, South Korea (2012)

Decorations on Screens Reflecting the Social Status of the Owner:

Screens in China, originating as symbols of power, were initially placed behind the emperor's throne. Interior screens from the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties that remain today reveal the Chinese perspective and creative approach to expressing privilege, authority, and the wealth of royals and officials. These screens were lacquered, gilded, inlaid with jade, and sometimes adorned with intricate carvings and precious materials, resulting in splendid, elaborate works of art. They were prominently positioned in the central areas of luxurious interiors such as palaces and mansions. Many masterpieces of painting and calligraphy flourished on screens during the Song (960–1279), Yuan (1297–1368), Ming (1367–1648), and Qing (1648–1911) dynasties. These diverse forms of screen decoration highlight the correspondence between decorative motifs and the owner's social status. Screens of four, six, or eight panels of identical size often featured continuous or contrasting themes on their surfaces, such as plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo, or the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter...



Nine-Dragon Screen at the Forbidden City, constructed during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1796), measures 27.5 meters in length and 5.5 meters in height. Made of colored ceramics, it is adorned with the imagery of nine dragons chasing pearls amidst clouds, symbolizing authority and auspicious fortune¹⁸.

The presence of screens throughout the dynasties of China, Korea, and Vietnam reveals similarities among East Asian monarchies. ***These screens, placed behind the thrones***, were made of precious materials and crafted with meticulous and elaborate techniques. The decorative motifs predominantly featured dragons, symbolizing the emperor and supreme authority.

¹⁸ Nguyen Van, “Dragon - A Unique Feature in Traditional Chinese Architecture”, source: <https://m.daikynghuyen.tv/van-hoa/nghe-thuat/rong-net-tieu-bieu-doc-dao-trong-kien-truc-truyen-thong-trung-hoa.html>, [05.7.2019]

A golden screen remains behind the king's throne at the Nguyen Dynasty Imperial Museum. This screen, shaped like an open scroll, is intricately carved with dragon motifs, accompanied by cloud patterns, with inscriptions in the center and brushes rising on both sides. At Lam Kinh Palace in Thanh Hoa, behind the throne of King Le Loi, there is also a restored screen adorned with intricate dragon imagery and decorative patterns...



Screen Behind the Throne of the Nguyen Dynasty Emperor at the Hue Imperial Museum and Screen Behind the Throne of King Le Loi at Lam Kinh Palace, Thanh Hoa (field research, May 29, 2023)

The dragon decoration on the inner screens of the royal dynasty was often placed behind the emperor's throne, symbolizing the monarch's authority and serving as the "backrest" for the sovereign's throne. This decorative element enhanced the monarch seated on the throne's majestic and "steadfast" appearance. Thus, the designs were diverse and elaborate, showcasing the king's authority and the artisans' exceptional craftsmanship. The screen also served as the location where "advisors" or "guards" of the emperor frequently stood. Hence, the screen embodied the "shadow" of the protective yet decorative form behind the encapsulated governance values in the nation's political sphere.

The phoenix/ "Phung" design is a noble symbol associated with queens and empresses, mainly representing the virtues of royal women. It was widely used on various items and furnishings and in the tombs of royal women. On the outer screens from the Nguyễn dynasty, the phoenix motif was predominant, decorated with elegance and dynamic yet tightly-knit

compositions, achieving high artistic standards. These were embellished with stone carvings alongside themes such as the eight treasures and floral motifs stylized from nature.

Through the decoration and construction of outer screens during the Nguyễn period, *the characteristic plasterwork and ceramic mosaics* of this era were showcased. These shared similarities in ceramic materials are not only found in East Asian countries but also Western nations globally. Hence, the screen serves as a marker of social status and hierarchy. Though it signifies societal relationships and interactions, it also expresses decorative artistry, attaining high aesthetic value and showcasing the artisans' talents handed down to future generations. The screen is a cultural expression that preserves and develops traditional craft secrets through beautiful floral patterns, poetry, and inscriptions imbued with meaningful symbolism.

The Literary Value Reflected Through Decorative Motifs on Screens:

Through the decorations on the screens, a cultural resemblance between Vietnamese screens and those of East Asian countries lies in incorporating literary and artistic elements. Famous poems by renowned contemporary poets were integrated into the decorations on screens. Regarding a Tran dynasty screen, educator Chu Van An once expressed the concept of "beauty as in painting" regarding the decorative images on the screens:

*Mountains rise, layer upon layer, like a painted screen,
The afternoon sun descends, illuminating half a stream...*¹⁹

On a Tran dynasty screen depicting a landscape painting, poet Pham Mai inscribed a poem that not only described the painting but also conveyed the artist's thoughtful reflections on life through the screen's decoration, portraying a harmonious scene of mountains and water:

*The grass and trees by a flowing stream,
Green mountains stretch under twilight's gleam.
I wish to call the little boat back home,
Yet the origin of this life remains unknown.*²⁰

During the Nguyen Dynasty, a two-sided lacquered screen composed of 10 panels, each measuring 45cm in width and 3m in height, formed a tall rectangular structure and is currently housed at Dinh II in Da Lat. This type of screen has legs, allowing for partial movement or easy disassembly for convenient transportation. Such screens remain relatively common in Japan and South Korea today.

¹⁹ Chu Quang Tru (1976), "Painting and Decoration," *Tran Dynasty Art*, Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, Institute of Arts - Ministry of Culture, p. 79.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

The first side of the screen features rare calligraphy with 22 poems inscribed in various Chinese script styles: regular (zhen), semi-cursive (xing), cursive (cao), clerical (li), and seal (zhuan). Among them are 12 imperial poems by Emperor Tu Duc, extracted from *Tu Duc's Imperial Poetry Collection* (*Tu Duc Ngu che thi*); two poems by Tung Thien Vuong Mien Tham from *Thuong Son Poetry Collection* (*Thuong Son thi tap*); three poems by Tuy Ly Vuong Mien Trinh (also known as Nguyen Phuc Mien Trinh) from *Vi Da Anthology* (*Vi Da hop tap*), with another from *Hoang Viet Poetry* (*Hoang Viet thi*); three poems by Bui Van Mac; and one poem by Emperor Le Thanh Tong from *Imperial Poetry Collection* (*Ngu che thi*). The second side of the screen depicts carved decorative scenes illustrating the daily life of the Nguyen Dynasty's imperial court, showcasing vivid depictions of temples, architecture, and royal ceremonies.

The "Thien Tu Tu Than" screen is one of the most famous from the Nguyen Dynasty and is currently housed at the Museum of Hue Royal Antiquities. This impressive screen, designed in a scroll, is beautifully crafted with intricate carvings. Its decorative motifs include lively depictions of plants and animals. However, the central section of the screen is left unadorned, reserved exclusively for inscriptions. On both sides, the inscriptions are deeply engraved and gilded. On the front side, the Chinese characters are arranged as follows:

The central line features four large characters: *Thien Tu Tu Than* (天子詞臣) written in the *Lishu* script style. *Thien Tu Tu Than* translates to "the literary vassal of the emperor," implying that Pham Quynh was exceptionally skilled in literature and made significant contributions to supporting Emperor Bao Dai in this field...On the back side's central section, there is a *Thất ngôn bát cú* Tang poetry composition, with a highly refined structure adhering to strict poetic rules. The poem is inscribed in the *Xingshu* cursive script style, with beautifully elegant strokes... Each line of the poem conveys the literary genius, scholarly achievements, or statesmanship of a renowned figure in Chinese history.²¹

Regarding the ornamental screen "*Ha Thanh Danh The*", currently housed at the Museum of Royal Fine Arts in Hue, Trương Quý Mẫn describes in detail this famous ceremonial screen from the Nguyễn Dynasty. It was crafted from high-quality wood, elaborately carved, and adorned with inscriptions carrying profound educational meanings under the Nguyễn rule:

As a ceremonial screen reflecting the cultural etiquette of individuals from a bygone era, the textual content is consistent with its decorations' symbolic meaning. The screen

²¹ Phan Thuan An (2005), "The Screen 'Thien Tu Tu Than' at the Museum of Imperial Fine Arts in Hue", *Journal of Research and Development, Han Nom Studies Bulletin* 2005, pp. 17–26.

delicately conveys the aspirations and noble wishes of past generations. It serves to honor a personality or talent with significant influence in contemporary society and embodies notions of prosperity, perpetuity, and fulfillment in life.²²



The two sides of the "Thien tu tu than" screen and the "Ha Thanh Danh The" screen, from the Nguyen Dynasty, are currently housed at the Hue Museum of Royal Antiquities.

At the same time, the use of characters as decoration on the surface of screens serves as a form of inscription, further confirming that writing—scripts—has always been present in Vietnamese rituals. On screens in burial sites, characters are displayed as decorative motifs and as "texts" that facilitate communication between two worlds: the living and the spiritual. Screens are an indispensable architectural feature in the tombs of kings, queens, or royal family members. Many architectural tomb complexes include screens at the entrance and rear of the burial area. Even today, screens in folk burial sites remain common across the northern, central, and southern regions, with nearly all screens adorned with characters, phrases, or poems...

The practice of inscribing characters or poetry on screens is a fairly common tradition across East Asian countries. In Japan, famously known as the "Land of Screens," decorating screens with poetry has long been a cultural tradition. This practice is evident in two stories: *The Story of the Waka Poem Written by the Imperial Censor on a Screen* (Story 31, Volume 24) and *The Story of the Great Minister Kintou Composing a Poem on a Screen* (Story 33, Volume 24), both found in the book *Kin'yō Wakashū (Collection of Golden Leaves)*²³:

The story 31, Volume 24, about the prince of Emperor Daigo²⁴, narrates: "A screen was created for the prince's chamber where he changed attire, and poets were invited to compose *waka* poems... Upon observing the screen depicting a spring scene with an image of a girl's

²² Truong Qui Man (2012), "On the Screen 'Ha Thanh Danh The' at the Museum of Imperial Fine Arts in Hue", source: <http://-choga.vn/forum/archive/index.php/t-249.html>, [updated: 09-24-2012, 01:13 PM].

²³ *The Collection of Ancient and Modern Tales (Konjaku Monogatari Shu)* is a comprehensive anthology of Japanese folklore, stories, and legends compiled in the latter half of the 12th century. It consists of 31 volumes containing over 1,000 stories. Translators: Nguyen Thi Oanh, Tran Thi Chung Toan, Dao Phuong Chi. Published by the Social Sciences Publishing House in 2016, 799 pages. Reference: Vt 518

²⁴ The Emperor of the early Heian period, Atsugimi (Atsuhito), was the first son of Emperor Uda. He reigned from 897 to 939

carriage traveling along a mountain path lined with blooming cherry blossoms," Major Irehira was invited to compose a *waka* poem on the screen. The poem was completed on "purple-silver paper" and was described as a masterpiece. The poem reads as follows:

*(Not knowing whether the cherry blossoms on Mount Yoshino have already withered,
Or if they still bloom in radiant splendor.*

*I wish to meet someone returning from viewing the blossoms,
To ask this question)*

Poetic Rendition:

*Cherry blossoms blush on hills so green,
Radiant hues, or has the bloom been seen?
O traveler, who admired the fleeting bloom,
Pray tell, that I may dispel this gloom.*

The second story, from Tale 33, Volume 24, during the reign of Emperor Ichijou²⁵, recounts how the Minister of the Left²⁶ Higashi Monin, upon his first entry into the court, wished to refurbish a screen. He summoned poets and commanded, "*Compose waka poetry to dedicate.*" Among these works was a screen depicting a house in April, adorned with wisteria blossoms. A poem composed by Dainagon Kintou²⁷ to illustrate the scene became renowned for its exceptional beauty:

*Fuji blossoms surpass the purple clouds in beauty.
Could this be a sign of auspiciousness for our home?*

Poetic Rendition:

*Wisteria blooms adorn the space,
More splendid than clouds in heaven's embrace.
Radiant hues in bright array,
A blessing foretells for this home today.*

In a calligraphy screen by Nobutada, a renowned calligrapher of the 17th century, he selected romantic poems by ancient female poets, expressing the sorrow, disappointment, and inexplicable anger of unrequited love.²⁸

A poem by the Chinese poet Du Fu (712–770) titled *Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup* (*Bat tien tuu coc*) has served as a source of inspiration for numerous Chinese art forms throughout

²⁵ Emperor Ichijou: Emperor of the mid-Heian period. He reigned from 986 to 1011

²⁶ Shōtōmon-in, also known as Fujiwara no Jōshi, was the daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga

²⁷ Dainagon Kintō, who held positions such as Right Chief Administrator, Councilor, Acting Middle Counselor, Acting Major Counselor, and concurrently Inspector

²⁸ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Preface_to_the_Langting_Gathering_by_Kameda_Bosai_1_of_2_Japan_Edo_period_dated_1824_AD_ink_on_paper_Tokyo_National_Museum

the ages, particularly in music, painting, and calligraphy. Similarly, calligraphers have widely adopted the theme of bamboo and poetry on many Chinese screens. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and the Song Dynasty (960–1279), bamboo was considered one of the fundamental forms of Chinese-style painting. Its combination with Chinese poetry on screens further highlighted these works' scholarly sophistication and artistic depth.



Japanese Screen, Edo Period, 1824 CE, ink on paper - Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan, and two Chinese Screens from the Tang and Song Dynasties – Theme: Bamboo Poetry

29

Themes of Daily Life, Landscapes, and Classical Stories... in Screen Decorations

The decoration on screens in Eastern cultures has long established a unique approach to decorative composition, an aesthetic concept of nature's recreation, and specific methods of expression. As artist Tran Huy Quang noted, “For Eastern people, shapes recorded from nature are merely raw materials. From this ‘raw material,’ the artist establishes a personal language by recreating the emotions embedded in these existing forms in a way that feels intimately connected.”³⁰

Themes derived from classical stories, legends, and historical anecdotes are commonly used as compositions for decorative patterns and motifs. Popular subjects include: *Long Ma Ha Do* (Dragon Horse Bearing the Map), *Ca Vuot Long Mon* (The Carp Leaping Over the Dragon Gate), *Ngu Long Hi Cau* (Five Dragons Playing with the Pearl), *Long Phung Chau Trieu* (Dragons and Phoenixes Attending Court), *Ca Hoa Rong* (Carp Transforming into a Dragon), *Ho Phu* (Tiger Face), *Vinh Quy Bai To* (Returning in Glory to Honor Ancestors), and *Bat Tien Qua Hai* (The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea)... The diversity and richness of decorative themes on screens, from exterior to interior ones, reflect the creativity and skill of artisans, who adeptly transform ideas into vivid and dynamic imagery.

Decorative themes focused on human activities, festivals, and lifestyles... are subjects that nearly all forms of art explore, capturing the customs and practices of people during specific

²⁹ *Bamboo and Chinese Poems*, 165 (2013), source: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/118363/bamboo-and-chinese-poems-doi-goga>

³⁰ Tran Huy Quang (1999), “*Vietnamese Lacquer Screens: Design, Decoration, and Application*”, grassroots-level scientific research project, University of Industrial Fine Arts.

historical periods. Depictions of nature combined with architecture are common themes found on screens during the Nguyen Dynasty. Some screens showcase the skill and talent of their creators, such as the screen at Kim Long Village's communal house in Hue, which portrays the *vinh quy bai to* (returning in glory to honor one's ancestors) scene from the Nguyen era. Another example is the woven rattan screen at the Hue Imperial Antiquities Museum, which, through masterful weaving techniques, depicts the country's landscapes and famous landmarks. The glass and silver screen, presented as a gift to Emperor Bao Dai, features scenic views of the nation, while the screen at Dinh 2 Palace in Da Lat illustrates the daily life of the Nguyen royal court... Alongside other examples from the Nguyen era, these screens vividly recreate the country's landscapes and express the profound love for the homeland held by the artists and artisans of the time.

The articles "*Ao Dai Xu Hue Tu Buc Tran Phong Xua*" (2004) by Tran Duc Anh Son and "*Buc Tran Phong Son Khac Bao Tang Co Vat Cung Dinh Hue*" (2011) by authors Thanh Duy & Minh Tam are two writings about a lacquer-carved protective screen from the Nguyen Dynasty. This screen was depicted in a new style by a group of North Vietnamese painters, reflecting their emotions upon visiting Hue. The screen captures unique images of Hue's traditional "*ao dai*" during the Nguyen Dynasty period:

...is a *protective screen* where functionality and decoration blend seamlessly. Thus, its historical value and artistic value are nearly parallel. Its existence today not only serves as evidence of a historical period but also provides practical data for research on Vietnamese art in the early 20th century. The artwork stands as a hallmark and a reflection of a historical era, as well as the artistic perspectives of its creator³¹.

This is also a remarkable similarity among the screens of East Asian countries. Through this, decorating interior screens truly stands as a milestone, embodying artistic and cultural values. The creative styles and decorative themes reflect the rhythm of social life while also portraying the thoughts and sentiments of people...



³¹ Thanh Duy & Minh Tam (2011), "*The Lacquer-Carved Protective Screen at the Hue Museum of Royal Antiquities*", source: <http://www.covathue.com/cac%20bai%20viet/Tranphongbaotang.html>.

Double-sided Lacquer Screen: One side, painted in crimson red, depicts Bao Dai—the last Emperor of Vietnam—surrounded by his entourage, including court officials, military generals, soldiers, servants, and musicians, all leaving the imperial palace in Hue. The second side, dominated by golden hues, portrays a serene scene featuring an Annamese phoenix and two cranes flying amidst Asian floral motifs. (Photo: "Going to Hong Kong to Buy Vietnamese Paintings," source: <http://soi.today/?p=15686>)

On Chinese and Japanese screens, these themes were also quite common, not only showcasing the craftsmanship and skill of the artisans in creating beautiful decorations on the screens but also serving as a means of recording contemporary history.

Screens with beautiful decorations and crafted from precious materials served as valuable gift items:

The Chinese often used screens as precious gifts from kings and emperors in diplomatic relations. During the Ch'ing era (403–250 BC), a double-sided screen inlaid with mother-of-pearl was presented, featuring beautiful decorative designs with shimmering, iridescent colors emitted from the mother-of-pearl pieces contrasted with the black lacquered background. “During the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty (1616–1911), luxurious screens were more commonly made. In this period, sending expensive screens as gifts became widespread...”³² as diplomatic presents.

Similarly, during the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam, many *interior screens* were gifts from provincial mandarins to the king on occasions such as birthdays, weddings, or significant national celebrations. These were precious items, both in terms of materials (gold, silver, jade, precious woods...) and as beautiful mobile paintings representing traditional crafts with the exquisite skills of artisans from various regions across the country: rattan weaving to create iconic landscapes of the nation; lacquer art with gold-gilded patterns and engraved lacquer forming Coromandel screens; jade, ivory, and gemstone carving; and glasswork from France gifted to the king featuring a map of Vietnam...

The *Ha Thanh Danh* The protective screen belonged to the Chief Magistrate of Ha Trung (Thanh Hoa) during the Nguyen Dynasty, named Ung Chuan. This screen was a gift presented to Magistrate Ung Chuan by his subordinates in the spring of 1915, during the reign of Emperor Duy Tan (1907–1916). The screen's content praises and affirms the honorable reputation of its owner. The decorative motifs prominently feature traditional themes such as

³² Ton Giai Tue, *Behind the Screen: A Brief History of Chinese “Pingfeng”*, source: <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2022/09/behind-the-screen-a-brief-history-of-chinese-pingfeng/>, [September 28, 2022].

the *Four Sacred Creatures* (dragon, qilin, turtle, phoenix), pine and deer, plum and bird, bamboo and stone, along with the *Eight Treasures* of Taoism, including a plantain fan, books, a musical instrument, a scroll, and more. Notably, despite the relatively small surface area of the screen, these rich decorative elements have been arranged in a harmonious and balanced composition, creating a vibrant aesthetic that does not overwhelm or confuse the viewer.

The screen “*Thien Tu Tu Than*” at the Hue Museum of Royal Antiquities features four prominent Chinese characters as the main decorative element across the entire wooden screen. This *protective screen* was created in 1941 during the reign of Emperor Bao Dai. It was commissioned and organized by officials from the Ministry of National Education in Hue to be presented to Minister Pham Quynh (1892–1945) on his 50th birthday.

The *golden protective screen*, measuring 20 cm x 19 cm and weighing 11.9 tael of gold, belonged to the collection of Crown Prince Bao Long. The upper section is decorated with an openwork motif of *Luong Long Chieu Nhat* (Two Dragons Adoring the Sun), while the lower section features *Long Ham Tho* (Dragon Holding Longevity). The two side columns of the screen are carved with dragon designs and rest atop two silver qilins weighing 2.2 taels. The front of the screen is inscribed with Chinese characters cast in gold: *Van Tho Tu Tuan Dai Khanh Tiet* (The Great Celebration of the 40th Birthday), prominently displayed against a backdrop of *Van Kien Hoan* (Swastika Pattern). This screen was a gift celebrating Emperor Khai Dinh's 40th birthday 1924. The *second golden protective screen*, comprising four interconnected gold panels, has a total length of 57.50 cm and weighs 1.66 kg. The front is embossed with decorations: a map of Vietnam (panel 1), a depiction of Thien Mu Pagoda (panel 2), scenes of Phu Van Lau and the Flag Tower of Hue (panel 3), and a design featuring dragons, clouds, and water waves (panel 4). The back of the screen is engraved with Chinese characters, indicating that it was a gift from the people of An Nam to Crown Prince Vinh Thuy in 1923. This screen is part of the collection of the former Emperor Bao Dai.

Also serving as a gift from Northern Vietnamese mandarins to celebrate Emperor Bao Dai's ascension to the throne, this was a precious offering, not only for its material value and the meticulous craftsmanship involved but especially for the auspicious symbolism reflected in the protective screen. The lacquered and gilded *protective screen* in the collection of Tran Thai (114 Hang Gai, Hanoi), measuring 135 cm in height and dating to the 19th–20th centuries, features prominent decorative motifs of carp and water waves on its surface. These designs symbolize longevity, enduring blessings, and the promise of good fortune. In Eastern beliefs, fish hold significant cultural and religious meaning. Specifically, the carp is a celestial creature, a messenger delivering divine messages. Carp in water symbolizes the relentless effort and the

aspiration to rise above one's circumstances, transforming into a mythical being (a dragon). It also embodies perseverance and the pursuit of extraordinary achievements.



The golden protective screen from the collection of Crown Prince Bao Long (Hue Museum of Royal Antiquities) - A golden protective screen from the Nguyen Dynasty, auctioned in London, England, in 2008 (currently housed in the Hue Museum of Royal Antiquities) - source 2012. And a lacquered and gilded double-sided screen, height: 135 cm, 19th century, is part of the collection of Mr. Tran Thai, 114 Hang Gia, Hoan Kiem, Hanoi.

The screen adds value to interior spaces by serving as both a display piece and a partition

During the Zhou Dynasty, upper-class nobles used screens in their homes to divide rooms into separate spaces for different social classes. By the Han Dynasty, wealthy individuals also began using screens to decorate their homes, with some screens made of lacquer. “According to the *Book of Han* (汉书), Emperor Cheng of Han had a screen in his carriage featuring a painting depicting Emperor Zhou of the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) in a scene of drunken revelry with his concubines.”³³. By the 17th and 18th centuries, Chinese lacquer screens began to be produced for export to European markets through the Coromandel Coast in southeastern India. These became renowned in the West as "Coromandel Screens," used for display in interior spaces.

For the Japanese, screens not only exist as partitions within interior spaces but also hold a prominent decorative function. As a result, many screens painted on paper or crafted with lacquer have become famous, showcasing the distinctive artistic styles of painters from previous eras. These screens are renowned for their exquisite beauty and high artistic value.

Since the Tran Dynasty, the Vietnamese have held the concept of decorating screens as a scaled-down and refined representation of nature, making painted screens a standard of natural beauty. During the Son Tay era, in the decoration of Phu Xuan Citadel, the practice of

³³ Ton Giai Tue, *Behind the Screen: A Brief History of Chinese “Pingfeng”*, source: <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2022/09/behind-the-screen-a-brief-history-of-chinese-pingfeng/>, [September 28, 2022]

painting screens on paper was recorded: "Nguyen The Lich, under the command of King Quang Trung, composed eight Nom poems inscribed on eight interconnected painted screens depicting 100 children to decorate the Phu Xuan Palace. The paintings are now lost, leaving only the Nom poems on the paintings, which provide a very general depiction of the scenes"³⁴. Through Dong Ho and Hang Trong paintings, the existence of screens has been partially documented, as seen in the *Danh Ghen* painting (Dong Ho style) and the *Tu Binh Truyen Kieu* set (Hang Trong style). Additionally, through photographs and sketches from the 19th and early 20th centuries, screens reflect their integral role in Vietnamese life. These screens, deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Vietnamese people from ancient times, have always been considered a form of artistic display.

Some surviving protective screens today are exquisite artifacts that have persisted as beautiful elements in traditional interiors. In the collections of private collectors, many screens dating back to the Nguyen Dynasty hold significant artistic value. These screens not only reflect the cultural adaptations of East Asian values but also showcase the craftsmanship and artistic creativity of ancient artisans. One notable piece is *a wooden screen in the collection of Nguyen Ba Dam* (born in 1922), residing on Giap Nhat Street, Nhan Chinh Ward, Thanh Xuan District, Hanoi. Made of rosewood and originating from the Mandarin Hoang Cao Khai family, this screen is intricately carved with geometric patterns. The detailed, sharp carvings create elaborate yet decisive decorative motifs. Another example is *a lacquered and gilded screen in the collection of Nguyen Canh Duc* (108 Au Co Street, Hanoi), dating to the 19th century. This protective screen features a large single panel shaped like a scroll resting on ornately carved pedestal legs. The top of the scroll curves gracefully and is adorned with dragon motifs, floral vines, and a crescent moon, flanked by depictions of swords on either side. Both sides of the screen are decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, a popular decorative technique during the Nguyen Dynasty. In *the collection of Duong Phu Hien* (380 Au Co Street, Hanoi) is another lacquered and gilded screen from the 19th century, measuring 188.5 cm in height. This large single-panel protective screen features a supportive base. The first side depicts serene river landscapes, celebrating the beauty of the nation and the peaceful, leisurely life of its people. The reverse side is inscribed with 100 different iterations of the character “*Phúc*” (Happiness), symbolizing the wish for blessings and happiness for the owner. The character *Phúc*, often incorporated into decorative motifs, is believed to possess mystical powers that bring good fortune and fulfillment. The base of this screen is adorned

³⁴ Chu Quang Tru (1992). “Sculpture and Painting”, Hue Fine Arts, Institute of Fine Arts - Hue Monuments Conservation Center, p. 103

with floral patterns, creating harmony between the main decorative elements on the large panel and the supporting base, resulting in a cohesive and elegant design.

In addition to their display purposes, screens have been used to create smaller spaces within a larger area, establishing relatively defined spaces that are distinctly separated. This is a particularly convenient function of screens, as they can be moved flexibly and deliberately. Even today, this functionality continues to be utilized in modern life.

3. Differences in Vietnamese Screen Decorations Compared to Other East Asian Countries

The shared influences among East Asian countries significantly impacted each nation's contemporary life stages. Although the screen is merely one of many household items and part of traditional architectural structures, research reveals numerous similarities in the societies of East Asian countries during the medieval and early modern periods.

However, differences emerge as distinctive features unique to each country and culture. Evaluating the similarities and differences in the decorative art of screens involves examining their form, content, and the traditional to contemporary concepts of their use. At the scientific conference *The Preservation and Exhibition of East Asian Culture in Relation to Folk Craft Aesthetics* in July 2003, Ms. Katayama Mariko from the Korean Museum in Kyoto, Japan, presented an intriguing paper on the similarities and differences between Korean and Japanese screens. This presentation revealed that: "In Japan and Korea today, only rectangular screens composed of multiple wooden panels remain, whereas single-panel screens, as commonly used in Vietnam and China, are now almost nonexistent."³⁵. Thus, beyond the similarities between Vietnamese screens and those of China and Japan, an evaluation reveals the cultural interplay and commonalities shaped by each nation's and region's geographical and natural climatic conditions, customs, and specific living environments. These factors have resulted in distinctive differences, mainly influenced by the impact of cultural and spiritual thought processes.

When researching the influence of other countries on Vietnam, the Government Electronic Newspaper asserts the following regarding Vietnam's exposure to external influences:

Although Vietnam was colonized by China and France for extended periods, the Southeast Asian cultural roots have persisted throughout historical periods up to the present day. These roots remain embedded in various forms such as myths, language,

³⁵ Phan Thanh Hai (2007), "Non Bo in the Royal Court", *Song Huong Journal*, No. 216, February Edition.

beliefs, customs... They lie deeply ingrained in the collective subconscious of the Vietnamese community.

This cultural essence serves as the foundation for folk culture, running parallel to academic culture and effectively contributing to the preservation of national identity during periods of colonization... It is precisely through this struggle that Vietnamese identity has been sharpened, clarified, and strongly asserted...³⁶

Through the traditional screen decoration system, the richness of themes and forms of decorative patterns reveals specific regulations for different social classes. The combination of decorative motifs with meaningful content on the screens, along with the imposing forms of the screens during the Nguyen Dynasty, not only created objects for display and beautification within architectural and interior spaces but also ensured their functional utility while reflecting the principles of harmony with the natural environment and interpersonal relationships. From a simple, functional item addressing the relationship between humans and nature to an object of aesthetic enhancement, resolving the dynamics of human interaction in daily life, screens have been elevated to a cultural symbol, embodying unique characteristics and remaining a precious treasure tied to the nation's history. The symbolic elements in screen decoration have enhanced the creativity of the Vietnamese people, transforming and adapting artistic innovation to align with Vietnamese culture, lifestyle, and thought, thereby creating distinct differences in the decoration of Vietnamese screens.

As cultural researcher, Phan Huy Le wrote: "East Asian values, while possessing continuity and permanence, are not immutable. In each historical period, East Asian values have undergone changes and played different roles in the rise and fall of the region and each country." He further noted, "In this context, East Asian values remain a spiritual strength of the region and each nation. For each country, these values must be combined with its unique heritage within a unified spiritual legacy. They should be respected, preserved, and promoted with a shared perspective and direction: always elevating and integrating the values of the era and human civilization, with the ultimate goal of sustainable development and preserving identity as the highest priority"³⁷.

The issue of national identity is always emphasized in every circumstance and reflected in the creativity of the Vietnamese people. On each screen, the decorative themes express a

³⁶ Government Electronic Newspaper (2010), How Does Vietnam Receive and Transform Foreign Cultural Elements?, Source: <http://baochinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Viet-Nam-tiep-nhan-va-tiep-bien-cac-yeu-to-van-hoa-ngoai-lai-nhu-the-nao/56836.vgp>, [December 27, 2010].

³⁷ Phan Huy Le, "East Asian Values Through Historical Progress," *Journal of Science, Vietnam National University, Hanoi*, Social Sciences and Humanities, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, 2002, pp. 7–8

distinct Vietnamese identity through *depictions of daily life, landscapes, and the people of Vietnam...*

The rattan-woven screen with a red lacquered frame, currently housed at the Hue Imperial Antiquities Museum, is a set of six-panel protective screens made of rattan. It was a gift from North Vietnam to celebrate the wedding of Emperor Bao Dai and Empress Nam Phuong (April 23, 1934). The screen, standing 120 cm tall, consists of six joined panels, each 60 cm wide. Its main structure is redwood painted with woven rattan, forming the central element inserted into the wooden frame. With the artisans' skill and talent, the screen depicts 12 iconic scenes of Vietnam, from Lang Son to Binh Thuan, through each region's landscapes, rivers, mountains, and representative architecture. The entire screen serves as a panoramic portrayal of Vietnam's natural beauty.

Hue maidens in flowing “*ao dai*” of various colors appear gracefully within the scene. At the center is a lakeside pavilion built in imperial architectural style, with the space extending across the entire screen. In the foreground, and right in the center, is a single-room, four-sided communal house. This is depicted on a double-sided carved lacquer screen preserved in the Hue Imperial Antiquities Museum (Inventory No. BTH-1437). This artwork was created by a group of Northern painters, including Nguyen Duc Nung, Hoang Lap Ngon, Pham Thuc Chuong, and Vu Nhu Hoanh, and after spending a week exploring Hue, these six artists, students of the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (Indochina College of Fine Arts), crafted this piece in 1937 as a gift to Emperor Bao Dai and Empress Nam Phuong. The carved and lacquered wooden protective screen, combining mother-of-pearl inlay, is a masterpiece of early Vietnamese modern art created during the nascent period of Vietnam's contemporary fine arts movement.

On the glass screen comprising three interconnected panels set on a wooden base, this small-sized protective screen designed for tabletop use is likely the last known protective screen from the Nguyen Dynasty. Its decorative theme features the landscapes of Vietnam, with intricately detailed and meticulous engravings of a map of Vietnam. The map, "drawn" entirely in silver, is securely framed within a sturdy wooden structure. The centerpiece of the decoration highlights Vietnam's map with landmarks from the three regions: the North (The Huc Bridge and Ngoc Son Temple), the Central region (Ngo Mon Gate), and the South (Nha Rong Wharf). These are iconic landmarks representing each locality. Elevated areas, such as the northern midland and mountainous regions and the western borders adjacent to Laos and Cambodia, are embossed with thick layers of silver, making them stand out compared to the lower plains. For the Red River Delta and Mekong Delta, which are known for rice cultivation,

symbols of farmers transplanting rice and buffalo plowing are depicted. Areas abundant with coconut trees, like Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Ben Tre, feature two parallel coconut trees inlaid with silver. Additionally, fishermen's boats and merchant ships are "drawn" in intricate detail along the coastline from the North to the South. The two side panels are prominently inscribed with two bold lines of text: "Độc lập - Thống nhất" (Independence - Unity), written in a circular seal script. The background of the text features three red stripes, symbolizing the flag of the Bao Dai era, subtly reminding the emperor not to become overly dependent on the French. This map is an exceptionally elaborate and detailed artwork, incorporating symbols from all regions of Vietnam to create a vivid and impressive representation of the nation's landscapes.

Among the decorative motifs on screens, the *Long Ma* (Dragon Horse) frequently appears in Hue, a quintessential motif in traditional architectural decoration. *Long Ma* is even considered a symbol of Hue's Imperial City. Most palaces, temples, communal houses, clan houses, and even civilian homes in Hue feature a screen positioned in front, and the *Long Ma* is the most commonly chosen motif for these screens. On screens, the *Long Ma* is depicted according to the legend of "Long Ma Phu Ha Do" (*The Dragon Horse Carrying the River Map*): its back bears the *Ha Do* (River Map) to present to King Fu Xi, its feet glide over the waves, and its head stretches towards the clouds. The most famous *Long Ma* screen in Hue was built in the eighth year of Emperor Thanh Thai's reign (1896) at Quoc Hoc Hue High School. The *Long Ma* depicted on this screen was adopted as the emblem for the Hue Festival logo from 2002 to the present day. As a mythical creature regarded as a transformation of the Dragon, the *Long Ma* has been praised in verse:

***Before the wind fluttering, the Dragon becomes the Horse,
Amidst the clouds gleaming, the Horse becomes the Dragon.
Carrying the weight of moral principles in poetic symbols,
Unveiling the scenery of transformation and harmony.***³⁸



³⁸ Nguyen Hao (2013). "Traces of the Past on Ancient Screens", *Ho Chi Minh City Sports*, source: <http://m.netcodo.com.vn/vi/52/2587/Hue---Di-San/Dau-xua-tren-binh-phong-co.html?view=mobile>, [13:56, May 29, 2013]

Dragon Horse and Kylin Motifs in Screen Decorations. Drawings by the Author

In traditional Vietnamese architectural decoration and sculpture, particularly in the Hue region, the image of the Dragon Horse appears frequently. It is often featured in exterior screen decorations through bas-relief, stucco art, or mosaic techniques with ceramic shards, serving as a unique symbol of the Nguyen Dynasty's imperial capital.

The tiger, a powerful beast and the third animal in the “*Thap Nhi Dia Chi*” (Twelve Zodiac Signs), carries deep symbolic meaning. It is believed to possess extraordinary strength capable of warding off evil spirits. The “*Ngu Ho*” (Five Tigers) are thought to guard five cardinal directions: Hoang Ho (Yellow Tiger) guards the central region (*earth* element); Hac Ho (Black Tiger) guards the north (*water* element); Bach Ho (White Tiger) guards the west (*metal* element); Xich Ho (Red Tiger) guards the south (*fire* element); Thanh Ho (Blue Tiger) guards the east (*wood* element). In Buddhism, the tiger symbolizes the strength of faith and the triumph over obstacles on the path to enlightenment.

As a typical motif in screen decoration, the tiger often appears on many exterior screens in temples, communal houses, and shrines with the symbolic meaning of guarding and protecting. In Hanoi, surveys of the “Thap Tam Trai” area (located west of the ancient Thang Long Citadel) and the “Le Mat” Communal House (Gia Lam, Hanoi, which has a close connection to Thap Tam Trai) reveal that most screens feature tiger imagery. These tigers are depicted in various forms but follow a consistent “format,” appearing on the back of the exterior screens. Based on accounts from Mr. Nguyen Dac Lien and members of the Thap Tam Trai Heritage Committee, it is inferred that these tigers were intended to guard from within, with some carved in a stance of leaping from forests or mountains. Notably, the exterior screen of the Le Mat Communal House features five tigers (*Ngu Ho*), representing the five directions of the earthly realm according to the *Dao Mau* (Mother Goddess Religion).

The tiger also appears in decorative compositions paired with flying dragons above, forming intertwined layouts in motifs such as “Dragon coiled, Tiger crouched” (*Long Ban Ho Cu*) and “Dragon curling, Tiger sitting” (*Rong Cuon, Ho Ngoi*). These motifs symbolize auspicious land, stable terrain, and enduring prosperity, ensuring the flourishing of future generations.

The decoration on traditional screens represents a treasure trove of art that demands exploration. Each interior screen combines spiritual and aesthetic values with material worth, creating “treasures” of the Nguyen Dynasty. These screens possess distinctive features compared to other East Asian countries and reflect strong regional characteristics with

specific and strict regulations (such as the Nguyen-era screen system in Hue or the screens in the Thap Tam Trai area of Hanoi). To this day, these treasures remain invaluable national artifacts, affirming Vietnam's unique identity within the broader context of "similarities and differences, where each of our countries maintains its distinct cultural identity while sharing common cultural traits of East Asia."³⁹.

4. Innovations and Transformations in Vietnamese Screen Decorations in Contemporary Interiors

From a modern perspective, screens continue to be creatively designed and utilized in interior space decoration, offering diverse applications: as a feng shui object with spiritual significance, a functional item for dividing and shielding spaces, and a decorative piece that enhances aesthetics and reflects cultural and artistic social behavior.

The development of modern screens is documented through several pieces at the Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts, which are modern artworks created in the early 20th century: the double-sided screen by artist Nguyen Van Bai (1935), with the front depicting *A Procession to the Pagoda* and the back featuring *The Four Seasons*; the double-sided screen by artist Nguyen Gia Tri (1939), with the front showing *Landscape* and the back, *Young Women in the Garden*; the screen *Chua Thay* (1944) by Hoang Tich Tru; and the double-sided screen (1954) by artist Pham Hau, with one side depicting *The Ngoc Son Temple Festival* and the other, *A Procession Celebrating the Victory of the Liberation of the Capital...* These screens feature traditional themes such as scenes of visiting pagodas, young women enjoying leisure activities, and depictions of plants and daily life... all familiar and rooted in Vietnamese tradition. The materials used include Vietnamese lacquer, lacquer painting techniques, and engraved lacquer,... which are traditional materials transformed by these artists into fine art mediums. They convey artistic emotions and elevate Vietnamese lacquer art to renowned levels of craftsmanship.



Lacquer Screen: "Phong Canh"
(Landscape) (1939),



Lacquer Screen: Chua Thay (Thay
Pagoda) (1944),

³⁹ Phan Huy Le (2001), "The East Asian Attributes of Vietnam", *Journal of Science, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3. 2002.

by Artist Nguyen Gia Triby Artist Hoang Tich Tru

In modern homes, the trend of returning to traditional values aligns with innovative modern design that incorporates the essence of classical heritage, and modern screens have, therefore, undergone significant adaptations in form, materials, arrangement, and usage, introducing new dimensions to human living spaces. The functional roles of modern screens, as envisioned by interior designers, include their use as decorative partitions to divide and beautify spaces by creating a sense of depth between the screen's decorations and the wall and as scenic artworks adorned with depictions of landscapes and natural wonders that can resemble large paintings of nature, becoming dual-purpose elements within the room.

Driven by societal demands, the need for creativity has spurred transformations in the design of screens, which are now more versatile, doubling as storage cabinets, display shelves, magazine racks, and more, with diverse features catering to contemporary needs. These innovations bring new aesthetic qualities and reflect the era's spirit, contributing to new cultural values in both tangible and intangible heritage.

CONCLUSION

To this day, the use of screens remains a distinctive feature of East Asian culture. In contemporary life, screens not only persist but also tend to evolve with increasingly diverse and innovative functions. Social demands serve as a driving force for creativity, leading to the remarkable transformations of screens. These works introduce new nuances and embody the era's spirit, creating new values in both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

In the context of national economic and cultural development, urbanization is an inevitable trend that is not limited to any specific region but is a shared phenomenon of the modern era. However, this development often comes with the risk of losing or diluting traditional cultural values that have existed for generations—a process that has become increasingly widespread. Screens, in general, particularly in urban areas (notably in Hanoi and Hue), are experiencing significant degradation. Preserving the cultural and artistic values of screens safeguards their material heritage and retains their immense spiritual significance. This remains an underexplored field of research, encompassing cultural, artistic, and spiritual dimensions that require further study and interpretation.

The decorative art of traditional Vietnamese screens, within the broader East Asian context, exhibits shared characteristics and uniquely Vietnamese features. The surviving screens reflect aspects of the Vietnamese worldview and philosophy of life through the

historical transformations of the nation. With their functional and artistic roles in traditional architecture, the decorations on traditional screens combine elements of fine art, structural design, and thematic content to create cohesive works of art. These screens harmonize with human living spaces, offering aesthetic values, practical utility, spiritual significance, and artistic expression. The creativity in screen-making contributes a small yet significant part to the diverse beauty of Vietnamese fine arts and culture.

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